

80s BABIES: HOW MEMBERS OF HIP HOP'S THIRD GENERATION  
UNDERSTAND AND PARTICIPATE IN THE CULTURE

A Thesis

by

CHARITY CLAY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

August 2009

Major Subject: Sociology

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Reuben A. Buford May
Committee Members,	Jane Sell
	Kimberly Brown
Head of Department,	Mark Fossett

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## ABSTRACT

80s Babies: How Members of Hip Hop's Third Generation Understand and Participate  
in the Culture. (August 2009)

Charity Clay, B.S., DePaul University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Reuben A. Buford May

This study used in-depth interviews with members of Hip Hop culture nationwide currently entering adulthood; those between 21-30. Its purpose being to learn what they understand Hip Hop culture to be, what it means to them and their identity and how it contributes to assessment of its history, present and predictions about its future. The project yielded 25 interviews with participants sharing various, at times contradictory, views about what Hip Hop culture is, the current condition of the culture, and its future direction and the salience it has for their identities. This research extends the current literature on Hip Hop by suggesting that it has grown to be a multi-generational culture and furthermore, begins the process of understanding the dynamics of cultural understanding and transformation within Hip Hop while it is still a burgeoning culture.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my generation, the 80s babies who have Hip Hop at the foundation of our identities and continue to use it as inspiration as we strive towards our various goals and have taken it as our responsibility to progress this culture for future generations to have available for their empowerment. I also dedicate it to future generations who will take this culture in directions that we currently cannot imagine but that will undoubtedly be connected to its original foundation. Finally, I dedicate this work to the memory of my late grandmother Annie Sue Hatten who supported me through this process with her kind words and always open ears and ability to connect Hip Hop's importance to my generation to the Blues culture of her own. Though she was unable to complete the journey with me, her presence is ever-present in every word.

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To my colleagues; the other 80s Babies in academia trying to advance the understanding and treatment of Hip Hop culture in their various disciplines for matching my passion and dedication and offering me valuable insight and feedback. Your efforts are greatly appreciated.

To the 80s babies who volunteered to participate in this research by sharing their insights on Hip Hop. May these results reflect your sentiments and give validity to our understanding of our own culture, which has previously been externally defined.

Finally, to my parents for never attempting to quell my love for Hip Hop because of its negative reputation, allowing me to show them how much of a positive force it continues to be in my life, and then encouraging my passion to be its ambassador.

## NOMENCLATURE

80s BABIES	Members of Hip Hop culture born 1978-1987
ALCHEMISTS	Members of Hip Hop culture born 1968-1977
PIONEERS	Members of Hip Hop culture born before 1968

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY HIP HOP?

Since the rise of gangster rap in the mid 1990s, both mainstream consumers and cultural critics have begun to pay closer attention to Hip Hop and the impact that the culture's musical product has on its listeners. As Hip Hop's popularity spread to reach nearly all aspects of popular culture, certain mainstream industries and corporations have attempted to capitalize on the culture's influence by using its art forms to sell everything from hamburgers to automobiles<sup>1</sup>. Hip Hop's images in mainstream media however, have been the main reason for the conclusions made by critics that this culture is responsible for the moral decline of the country's youth and the cause of violent criminal activity, narcotic use and trafficking, promiscuity and sexual irresponsibility, domestic abuse, resistance to education and lack of respect for authority--an understanding commonly used by cultural critics like Bill O'Reilly<sup>2</sup>, Stanley Crouch<sup>3</sup> and others whose views have expanded out of public opinion and into academia.

Most recently, in *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America* (2008), linguist John McWhorter makes two claims concerning Hip Hop. First, he claims that scholars like Michael Eric Dyson and Cornel West, who defend Hip Hop, are doing so only to advance their careers and not as sincere advocates of the culture's

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This thesis follows the style of *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.

<sup>1</sup> Companies like McDonalds and Ford Motors have used Hip Hop music, breakdancing in their commercials and graffiti lettering on their billboards.

<sup>2</sup> O'Reilly, a right wing conservative correspondent on Fox News has publicly asserted that Hip Hop is hurting America's children with its negative messages. He has specifically called out artists like Ludacris, Cam'ron and Nas as proof that Hip Hop has nothing positive to give the young listeners it attracts with its flashy images.

<sup>3</sup> Crouch, columnist for the *New York Daily News* and cultural critic, claims that nothing positive will come out of the world of Hip Hop because the people involved are only interested in making money and that it is nothing more than a modern day minstrel show that perpetuates age old stereotypes of blacks in media.

importance to its members and United States society as a whole. McWhorter's subsequent claim is that Hip Hop should not be defended because it is nothing more than songs composed of superficial lyrics and addictive beats that contain no concrete connection to any social or economic movement or efforts to empower Blacks to improve their condition. McWhorter further asserts that, in many ways, Hip Hop sabotages sincere improvement efforts. He expresses this perspective in "How Hip Hop Holds Blacks Back" (2003), in which he claimed that black youth who adopt a Hip Hop identity have no chance to be successful professionals because Hip Hop prevents them from obtaining the skills necessary to navigate any serious workplace; according to McWhorter, Hip Hop does this by holding that an adversarial stance towards authority translates into authentic blackness (McWhorter 2003).

Although I disagree with McWhorter's analysis of Hip Hop, and the professional success of the "80s babies" in this project disprove his claims, I do agree with his assessment that some scholars, McWhorter included, have used Hip Hop in their scholarship in attempts to gain instant notoriety, due to its interest to readers and not in an effort to broaden the understanding within academia and among the general public of the complexities of the culture. As a result, scholarly work has not reflected the sentiments of the culture's members, so much as it has reflected the sentiments of scholars pertaining to Hip Hop.

Missing from the majority of scholarship is the voice of Hip Hop's members who are not famous artists and analyses that evaluate Hip Hop culture according to its own norms. The present research seeks to add those views into the developing body of new

Hip Hop scholarship. The views of members of Hip Hop culture should help further the understanding of Hip Hop culture by showing how it shapes the lives of the people connected to it. In addition, these views will show that the commonly accepted media representations are unbalanced and provide an alternate foundation for both readers and scholars to use when seeking to understand Hip Hop culture. The major questions driving this research are:

1. Who are these “80s babies?”
2. What is Hip Hop and what does Hip Hop mean to them?
3. How do they understand requirements of their membership in Hip Hop culture?
4. What do they think about the current state and future of Hip Hop?

To frame this research, I will use Symbolic Interactionism and as well as the historical context of black cultural definition, transformation and perpetuation.

It is my goal to bring attention to the benefits of critical ethnography when studying subcultures (e.g. Hip Hop) by showing that they have their own cultural norms and values that should be respected for analysis by scholars. I also intend to present the complexities of Hip Hop culture that run counter to previous research, which sought to essentialize it by imposing rigid definitions and limited acceptance of what Hip Hop is and how members participate within it.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Hip Hop History and Historiography

Originally, the most popular approach in Hip Hop studies was tracing its roots and identifying its early influences. This work began in the 1990s and originally looked back at 1970s and 1980s Hip Hop. This method often approached the culture's artforms separately: tracing DJ'ing to Jamaican Dub music,<sup>4</sup> emceeing to West African Griots,<sup>5</sup> break-dancing to Afro-Brazilian Capoeira,<sup>6</sup> and graffiti to prehistoric Egyptian, Roman and Greek societies.

Initially, the art forms of breakdancing and aerosol writing were linked to the gangs of the South Bronx to which many minority youth belonged because tagging territory and winning dance battles helped gangs gain notoriety (Ahearn and Fricke 2002; Chang 2005). The next art form to be linked to the dances and graffiti was the DJ'ing because scholars noticed the DJ's important role in creating the music mixes for the breakdancers (Chang 2005; Ahearn and Fricke 2002; George 1999). As the culture progressed, the gangs gave way to breaking crews mainly because gangs were not allowed entrance into many of the venues where DJs played because both club owners and partygoers feared violence (Ahearn and Fricke 2002). The shift from gangs to breaking crews helped change the focus of Hip Hop culture to the DJs because they began to compete with each other for fans and the respect of the crews. This

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<sup>4</sup> Jamaican dub is form of music that evolved from Reggae in the 1960s. It involved taking remixes of existing songs, removing the vocals, enhancing the bass drum and adding echo and reverb techniques.

<sup>5</sup> Griots were West African storytellers who spoke over drums and other instruments. They told stories to educate, warn, entertain and inform the other people in the village.

<sup>6</sup> Capoeira is a Brazilian mixture of martial arts and dance known for its acrobatics and groundwork using flips, spins, headstands, kicks and sweeps.

competition between pioneering DJs like Afrika Bambaataa<sup>7</sup>, Grandmaster Flash<sup>8</sup> and Kool Herc<sup>9</sup> led to the innovation of turntable techniques like scratching<sup>10</sup> and back spinning<sup>11</sup> (George 1999; Ahearn and Fricke 2002). Because the DJs were often older than the other members in the culture, they began to use Hip Hop art forms to educate, unify and empower their communities, creating the element of Hip Hop culture that is not an artform – knowledge of self<sup>12</sup> (George 1999).

Early Hip Hop historiography focused on how the artforms of aerosol writing, breakdancing, DJ'ing and emceeing developed into the other four elements of Hip Hop culture, showing how each evolved from being a local practice to a mainstream global phenomenon. The most notable examples are aerosol writers being given galleries in European fine arts museums during the late 1970s<sup>13</sup> and the outbreak of breakdancing

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<sup>7</sup> Bambaataa was born in the South Bronx in 1957 and is known as the Godfather of Universal Hip Hop culture and the originator of the electro funk sound. He was originally the leader of the Black Spades; the largest youth gang in the city, but later turned the gang into the Zulu Nation responsible for upholding and spreading Hip Hop culture.

<sup>8</sup> Flash was born in Barbados in 1958 and is credited with developing the techniques of cutting and scratching.

<sup>9</sup> Herc was born in Jamaica in 1955 and combined the two turntable setup of disco DJs with the percussion driven production of Jamaican dub music. He began to make breakbeats and extend drum loops with no lyrics, for breakdancers.

<sup>10</sup> Scratching is when a DJ interjects vocal snippets from a record being played on one table into the music playing from another turntable or uses the vocal snippets from a turntable to make original sounds, the most basic ones being whips and chirps.

<sup>11</sup> Back spinning is when a DJ replays segments of a recording over and over back and forth on two turntables.

<sup>12</sup> The concept of Knowledge of Self used as an element of Hip Hop culture comes from Chapter One of a text known as *The Alchemy of Happiness* published originally by Al Ghazzali. The chapter emphasizes the importance of individuals recognizing the divinity that is manifested within themselves as a source of empowerment.

<sup>13</sup> In 1979, artist Lee Quinones was given an opportunity to show his work in Rome at a gallery opening. In the 1980s other famous aerosol writers had their work in galleries and museums in European countries like Denmark and the Netherlands.

films in the mid 1980s.<sup>14</sup> During the time of this initial research, rappers did not do much more than chant over the DJ mixes to keep the crowd excited,<sup>15</sup> but eventually they started composing full-length rhymes to rap over the mixes. Because these rhymes were spoken in slang and dealt with the conditions of the emcees and their peers, they finally gave a voice to the culture that would be ultimately known as Hip Hop (Ards 1999; Ahearn and Fricke 2002; Chang 2005).

Pioneering scholarship focused specifically on rap music sought to determine whether rap music's availability to the masses was good or bad for both Hip Hop culture and the people and community it represented, because of its foundations of resistance and rebellion<sup>16</sup> (Dyson 1993; Judy 1994; Boyd 1997). This concern arose from the debate that centered on Sugar Hill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* the first recorded rap song, in 1979. Some within the culture call them Hip Hop's first "sell-outs" because they did not write their lyrics,<sup>17</sup> and they recorded their song for profit instead of for the enjoyment of the community. Others credit the group for helping establish rap music as a viable career path for aspiring emcees (Ahearn and Fricke 2002).

Since journalists did most of the pioneering Hip Hop history and historiography, the literature often focused on the development of Hip Hop's artforms with little analysis of the dynamics that make it a culture. It also focused mainly on the culture's most

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<sup>14</sup> *Beat Street*, *Breakin'*, and the sequel *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* were movies based on the lives of breakdancers in 1984.

<sup>15</sup> These early emcees used call and response techniques to keep partygoers interested. Some popular phrases were "yes, yes, y'all," "clap your hands everybody," "throw your hands in the air, and wave 'em like you just don't care," and "rock, rock, don't stop."

<sup>16</sup> Because Hip Hop is built on resistance its acceptance by mainstream audiences is seen by some as being completely against its purpose.

<sup>17</sup> Big Bank Hank, one of the members of Sugar Hill gang was not a rapper so he uses rhymes taken from the rhyme book of South Bronx emcee Grandmaster Caz also known as Casanova Fly.

visible aspect--rap music. What the literature neglected, however, was an analysis of how members of the culture understood it. As a result, their views are not significantly included in the culture's written history.

There is a rich oral history among the members of Hip Hop culture, but their voices are rarely integrated into the literature. The one text that is composed mainly of voices from within Hip Hop culture is Charlie Ahern and Jim Fricke's book *Yes, Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade* published in 2002. This book is composed primarily of interview data from members of Hip Hop culture as it was forming. My research will take a similar approach being composed mostly of data expressing views from the members of the culture, but I will go a step further to ask Hip Hop heads about issues pertaining to Hip Hop's current state, its legacy, and projected direction.

## 2.2 First Wave of Hip Hop Scholarship

The term “Hip Hop” was coined in the late 1970s to describe the culture that young minorities had developed in the south Bronx area of New York City around the four artforms of emceeing, breaking, Djing and aerosol writing and a resistance ideology based around the concept of knowledge of self (George 1999; Foreman and Neal 2004; Chang 2005; Price 2006; Hess 2007). By the mid 1980s, journalists at local New York City publications began writing on Hip Hop culture, training most of their attention on graffiti writing and break dancing (Foreman and Neal 2004), focusing on the connection between these artforms and New York City minority youth gangs, and highlighting how they shaped the culture (Ahearn & Fricke 2002; Chang 2005). These journalists observed breakdancers and their crews, as well as the many bystanders in large public spaces in New York City, asking them about breakdancing and what it meant. They also asked the bystanders what they thought of the dancing they observed (Banes 1985).

Their work contrasted with media reports that claimed graffiti to be a public nuisance with responses from interviews done with writers who claimed it to be artistic expression and liberation<sup>18</sup> (Castleman 1982; Miller 2002). Journalists like Castleman and Miller used interviews and observations to show how aerosol writing and breakdancing constituted a battle for space in urban America, both among individual artists and crews as well as between artists and the establishment that they felt had

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<sup>18</sup> In the film documentary *Style Wars*, produced by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, there is footage shown of various well known writers like “Blade,” “Daze,” “Dondi,” “Lady Pink,” “Kase,” “Skeme,” “Zephyr” and others (35 writers in all) talking about the political purposes of them tagging on the trains that is contrasted with New York City mayor Ed Koch speaking about how much of a threat to public safety graffiti was.



disenfranchised them<sup>19</sup> (Miller 2002). Miller and Silver always included the responses of actual artists and other members of the writing and dancing community in their work, instead of exclusively using their own interpretations of what they observed as the basis for analyses. Because the graffiti and dancing were getting more attention in the mainstream at the time, there was not much being written about rap music. But, as rappers began circulating tapes and eventually pressing and distributing records with major record companies,<sup>20</sup> the focus shifted from the other artforms of Hip Hop culture to the music, as it became the most visible and most easily accessible element (George 1998; Ahearn and Fricke 2002).

One of the earliest critiques of rap music was “The Rap on Rap: The Black Music That’s Not Either.” David Samuels wrote this critique in 1991 in response to N.W.A’s *Niggaz4life* album becoming the number one record on the United States Billboard music charts. Samuels claimed that because rap music was composed of elements sampled from previous recordings, it was not music. Furthermore, he argued that because the majority of its consumers were white, rap was not black (Samuels 1991). Both the chart topping status of N.W.A’s album and the critiques from those like David Samuels signified how the attention paid to Hip Hop culture shifted from the artforms of aerosol writing and breakdancing to rap music, including the elements of DJing and emceeing.

In the same year as Samuels’ critique, *Signifying Rappers: Rap, Space, and the*

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<sup>19</sup> Many aerosol writers were aware of the inadequacies in social services like housing, transportation, garbage pick up, clean facilities, good schools, etc. in their neighborhoods.

<sup>20</sup> In 1979 Sylvia Robinson, owner of All Platinum Records, partnered with a rap trio that became known as the Sugar Hill Gang, and formed Sugar Hill records and released the first Rap song “rapper’s delight”

*Urban Present* (1991), a book considered to be the first ethnographic work on rap music was published. Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace wrote the book after observing young blacks in the North Dorchester area of Boston, Massachusetts. These youth were the owners and artists of a local rap label called RJam Productions. Making reference to Samuel's critique, the authors claimed that Samuels and others had misunderstood rap music. Their purpose for writing the book was to validate rap music to whites, who did not understand or respect it, by showing its importance to those who participated in it, based on the argument that, although whites listened to rap, they did not understand it or the culture it represents. Though they initially used their interactions with the young blacks at the record label to situate rap and Hip Hop culture within an urban environment and make comments about the social conditions that fueled it, Costello and Wallace shifted their focus from the artists' connection to the music and its meaning to them and the other members of the culture, to a breakdown of what rap music is. They used the following five criteria to characterize rap music:

1. No melody besides canonized fragments without progression
2. A driving and easy to dance to 4/4 cut time beat
3. Lyrics yelled or spoken with the beat
4. Content containing at least one of the following themes
  - a. Black Nationalism
  - b. General bragging about the rapper and his/her crew
  - c. Political and artistic timidity of the black community
  - d. Critique of the recording industry

- e. Critique and support of the marginalization of women
- f. Disdain for drug users and pushers

5. An aesthetic considered shallow and not worthy of being considered art.

After establishing these criteria for rap music, Costello and Wallace's focus on justifying them. However, because Costello and Wallace's work is one of the first ethnographic studies of rap music, it laid a foundation for scholarship that analyzes rap music as a method of understanding Hip Hop culture. Their criteria for rap music focused on the messages of the emcee and the format of the production, but paid little attention to the artform of DJing. One major problem with this foundation is that it does not acknowledge Hip Hop as a culture with rap music as a component; instead it presents rap music as the definitive representation of Hip Hop culture.

In *Say It Loud: The Story of Rap Music* (1994), K. Maurice Jones cautioned against using rappers and rap lyrics to totally represent Hip Hop culture. He argues that the Hip Hop community often rejects "radio friendly" rappers because their purpose is to make money not music.<sup>21</sup> He acknowledges that there is authentic rap music that sometimes crosses over into the mainstream, but asserts that authenticity in Hip Hop is determined by the artists' primary intent being to make good music, not millions of dollars. Jones further holds that outside researchers who cannot tell the difference in an artists' intention may present Hip Hop in a way that members of the culture actually reject.

Additionally, Jones argues that rap is part of a black oral tradition that traces

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<sup>21</sup> Sellout rappers are the ones that tailored their songs to fit into the mainstream. Many of these songs are more simplistic with their rhyme scheme and production and not as socially conscious with their lyrics.

back to the Griots of West Africa. According to many rappers, their influences come from a variety of orators, ranging from comedians like Redd Foxx and Richard Pryor, activists like Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, and characters in Blaxploitation movies like Super Fly, Shaft, and Foxy Brown<sup>22</sup>. Jones discusses the relationship between black musicians and the mainstream music industry that has traditionally forced black musicians to change their music to be more palatable to mainstream audiences, and notes that rap music is not exempt from this practice.

What Jones' work shows is how rap music has its own specific tradition in addition to its position as a component of Hip Hop culture. This supports many scholars' position that Hip Hop is postmodern culture because its elements are derived from pre-existing artforms. His work also shows that the representations of rap music and Hip Hop culture seen in the mainstream do not always clearly reflect the views held by those within the culture. Traditionally, scholarship has focused on analyzing of those mainstream representations of rap music, assuming that they are valid within Hip Hop culture. Although Jones does not delve deeply into the critiques that the members of Hip Hop culture have with the mainstream representations of the culture, he acknowledges that they do exist and establishes the need for those critiques to be heard. Unfortunately little of the initial scholarship on Hip Hop culture and rap music acknowledged these critiques as valid enough to place the views of those within Hip Hop culture on the same level as the analysis of rap music content.

The next major publication on Hip Hop was Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap*

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<sup>22</sup> Rap Artist Snoop Dogg portrayed a Blaxploitation persona based on Super Fly and shaft, and Rapper Foxy Brown took her stage name from the Pam Grier Blaxploitation character with the same name.

*Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), with a focus on understanding what messages the lyrics in rap music and the images in music videos send about black culture. Rose claims that lyrics and videos are the primary ways that rappers communicate their messages to their community. She further argues that rappers are the most important figures in Hip Hop culture because they represent the voice of an urban minority underclass that is often misunderstood and vilified or completely ignored by the majority of citizens in this country. Rose asserts that rappers express to the world, the stories of the ignored minority from their own experiences, either lived or observed.

Rose claims that by speaking about the issues that affect the people that rappers represent, rap music is a catalyst for change, because it brings the disenfranchised from the margins to the center of society by exposing the realities of social stratification and racial injustice. These issues include, but are not limited to, police brutality and unfair sentencing of young blacks, the complexities of drug dealing and drug addiction, the relationships between young black men and women, the dynamics of gang activity, gentrification, the failure of the nation's public education system, unhealthy living conditions for blacks, and the desire to be rich or just make a living when there are not many opportunities for gainful employment and countless others. Rose further asserts that there are social and political purposes for Hip Hop to make change, but she also acknowledges how mainstream media outlets can undermine that purpose.

According to Rose, artists often must change their messages before they are eligible to be played on radio or viewed in music video form and questions the criteria

that media outlets used in determining what songs are allowed to be heard and what images are allowed to be viewed by the general public. She specifically critiques MTV for allowing Wrecks-N-Effect's "Rumpshaker" video, which is composed mostly of women in bikinis gyrating their behinds and breasts to a beat that accompanies lyrics about casual sex, but refusing to allow A Tribe Called Quest's "Bonita Applebum" video which features a partially animated story about a young man trying to court a young woman. According to Rose, MTV's decision not to air the "Bonita Applebum" video was because of the use of the word prophylactic.<sup>23</sup> Rose uses this example to support her claim that the mainstream representations of Hip Hop culture often present images that are over-sexualized and violent while more positive representations are often overshadowed.

Rose acknowledges that there is violence and sexism within Hip Hop culture, but claims that there are also critiques of those ideologies and practices within the culture that are not often seen in media representations. She concludes by asserting that the relationship between Hip Hop culture and the mainstream is volatile because Hip Hop's global influence is so visible<sup>24</sup> and misrepresentations often reinforce stereotypes of young minorities, instead of opening up dialogue about the social conditions that Hip Hop exposes. Rose's work is similar to other scholarship that focuses on rappers and lyrical content to analyze Hip Hop culture. Where Rose differs, however, is that she

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<sup>23</sup> MTV's decision seems puzzling because the images in the rump shaker video present women as sexual objects, while the mention of prophylactics in the "Bonita Applebum" video promotes safe sex practices.

<sup>24</sup> Hip Hop's influence can be seen in the fashion industry with Hip Hop's aesthetic influencing clothing styles and designs. It can also be seen in the marketing campaigns of companies like Sprite and McDonalds, which use rap music and slang in their commercials. Many countries have developed their own forms of Hip Hop culture, combining it with their own languages and elements of their own regional culture.

acknowledges that rap music is the voice of the culture. Her work does focus on representations of rap music as not always accurate portrayals of the sentiments of the artists or other members of Hip Hop. Her indictment of MTV and other mainstream media outlets as undermining the political purposes of rap music and Hip Hop culture further demonstrates that there is more to the culture than songs on the radio and videos on the television.

Rose's demonstrations are a step beyond the trend to take the mainstream representations at face value for analysis, but her work still neglects the majority of the culture's members; those for whom the rappers speak. It does, however, focus on Hip Hop culture and rap music as empowering disenfranchised black youth and as a critique of the social conditions of this country. Rose's work helps to justify Hip Hop as a resistance culture, when other researchers still refuse to see it as such. The purpose of my research is to give a voice and a place in the scholarship to those that Rose and other scholars continue to neglect, as I argue that emcees represent them most fully. I hold that the misrepresentations of emcees in the mainstream does not accurately represent the sentiments of Hip Hop's members, so my research seeks to allow members to represent themselves.

A year later, Russell Potter published the book *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (1995). In this book, Potter investigates what makes Hip Hop a resistance culture using the argument that its resistance is connected to it being a contemporary example of postmodern culture. He first asserts that by using African American Vernacular English (AAVE), rap music and Hip Hop culture engage

in a form of revolt through language, one of the oldest forms of revolt for blacks in America. He argues that the resistance in Hip Hop is consistent with the tradition of resistance in black culture that has existed since slavery, using vernacular as a way to resist and reject the oppression associated with the whites who tried to teach the slaves Standard English.<sup>25</sup> Potter holds that the spoken resistance is converted into action through the artforms of breakdancing, aerosol writing and DJing and through that resistance, it becomes an ideology for the culture's members. The author then details how each artform is a form of resistance. By focusing on aspects of Hip Hop culture other than rap music--other elements of breakdancing and aerosol writing, language<sup>26</sup>, fashion, and the emphasis on creativity, innovation and individuality--that comprise Hip Hop's aesthetic, Potter highlights a rarely studied aspect of the culture.

Not only does Potter make the argument that Hip Hop is a resistance culture, he asserts that its artforms make up a new postmodern art movement because they break the rules of traditional high art. Potter echoes scholars who state that the purpose of postmodernist art is to resist the accepted styles, norms and standards that constitute acceptable art. Because Potter considers Hip Hop culture to be postmodern, he holds it as ever changing and indefinable, claiming that its purpose will always be to create new styles and innovations. As support, Potter cites the constant invention of new scratching and sampling techniques by DJs and producers, new dances and dance moves by

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<sup>25</sup> Slaves often used vernacular and other coded language to keep their slave masters from deciphering the messages they were transmitting. Much of this coded language has become a part of the lexicon of American English. Joseph E. Holloway. "The Impact of African Languages on American English," [www.slaveryinamerica.org](http://www.slaveryinamerica.org), June 15 2008  
<[http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs\\_es\\_languages.htm](http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs_es_languages.htm)>

<sup>26</sup> Much of the slang heard and made famous in the mainstream through rap lyrics comes from terms made up by non-rapper members of the culture that became a part of the everyday lexicon.



breakdancers, the new line styles, color patterns and canvas of writers, and the constant signifying through the invention of new slang and constant reappropriation of words by members of the culture.<sup>27</sup> He likens Hip Hop culture to the Punk subcultures of Great Britain, as both are comprised mainly of young people who seek to subvert the dominant culture both verbally through language and non-verbally through style, dance, and visual art<sup>28</sup>.

Potter argues that the resistance in Hip Hop gives it the ability to resist cultural commodification that occurs as a function of American capitalism, since corporations attempt to exploit sub culture style and ethos for profit by packaging it for the general population as a way to achieve honorary membership into various cultures by adopting their stylized symbols. Potter echoes Jones by acknowledging that there are artists who do whatever is necessary to be rich, but asserts that members of Hip Hop culture neither respect those artists nor associate them with the culture. For Potter, Hip Hop culture is an example of postmodernism and a resistance tradition within black culture that rejects the narrow and static definitions that have been imposed on it. Potter specifically indicts white scholars in the 1990s for analyzing black culture in ways that they never do with white culture, often concluding that black culture is inherently problematic because it differs from the white cultural practices that have been normalized.

In 1997, Robin D.G. Kelley further critiqued the scholarship on black culture in

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<sup>27</sup> DJs use pre-existing elements to create new sounds. Emcees use vernacular and ignore traditional verse structure. Breakdancers interpolate martial arts movements and those from other dance styles and movement to create moves. Writers use public space as canvas and create new strokes and techniques with aerosol spray paint cans.

<sup>28</sup> The similarities that Potter draws between Punk and Hip Hop culture influenced my decision to look at Punk culture research to determine my methodology.

*Yo Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America.* He echoes the sentiments of Potter about white social scientists often concluding that black culture is problematic in their analyses. He traces these conclusions to whites' obsession with identifying and fixing the problems of blacks. Kelley sees this obsession as a problem within scholarship because these social scientists rarely investigate white culture, making the assumption that it does not need fixing, as black culture does. He claims that white liberal social scientists who study Hip Hop only study it in line with the views they have of young urban blacks, all the while claiming to be objective. According to Kelley, this view results in research that ignores the aesthetics of Hip Hop, limiting it to cries for help and as ways of coping with racial oppression instead of resisting it.

Kelley's critique of white social scientists challenges scholars from within the Hip Hop community to take an interest in writing the history and scholarship about their own culture. He does not critique the social scientists for observing blacks, but rather for the gaze they employ that fails to acknowledge the norms and values of non-white cultures as valid. His critique is a push for insider research because of the biases and prejudices that white social scientists have that cause them to see black culture as a spectacle; something completely different from their own culture. My claim is that scholars from within Hip Hop culture, of course, will have biases when conducting their research, but, because they do not view the culture as inherently problematic and are aware of the diversity within it, will be able to produce work that more accurately reflects that diversity than does scholarship by outside researchers who rely on the belief that distance from the subject gives the scholar an objective and unbiased position.

### 2.3 Second Wave of Hip Hop Scholarship

As Kelley recommended, more scholars from within Hip Hop culture have begun to write about it. Initially, much of this scholarship was written in defense of Hip Hop culture against critics like William Bennett, Stanley Crouch, Bill O'Reilly, John McWhorter and others, who claim that the messages and images of Hip Hop are nothing but negative and blame it for the moral decline of this country's youth. Bennett, Crouch, and O'Reilly have criticized Hip Hop artists for the use of profanity and glorification of violence in their songs and refusal to take responsibility for the impact they have on their young listeners.

As a result, the task of more recent Hip Hop scholars is to first show the redeeming qualities of Hip Hop culture to those who see it only as destructive to the morality of America's youth. Bakari Kitwana's 2002 book *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*, takes the first step. He describes Hip Hop not only as a culture, but also as a way to understand the attitudes and views of the post civil rights generation of blacks that he designates as the Hip Hop generation (black Americans born between 1964 and 1984). Kitwana situates the Hip Hop generation with the catalytic events or phenomena that shape the views of the generation and the views of its members. He names the following six salient phenomena:

1. Visibility of black youth in popular culture via professional sports showing how the sports heroes of this generation are more outspoken and brash than

their parents' generation.<sup>29</sup>

2. Globalization and its impact on the job market for unskilled workers and cultural attitudes toward "outsiders" that assert a need for unity.
3. Segregation in the post civil rights era that exists more covertly, but no less vigorously, even though laws have made racial discrimination illegal.
4. Criminal justice policies that unfairly target young blacks with sentencing laws contributing to skyrocketing numbers of incarcerated young black men and resulting in destabilized communities.
5. Representations of blacks in the media pertaining to the war on drugs presenting them as criminals and drug addicts when statistics show that blacks are no more likely to commit crimes and do not constitute the majority of illegal drug users.
6. Quality of life shifts for blacks, creating a larger middle class, but also widening the gap between the middle and working classes (Kitwana 2002).

Kitwana's major argument is that the members of the Hip Hop generation are different from members of previous generations of African Americans because they are the first to grow up without legal segregation. He argues that segregation, equal protection under the law, and access to resources, as well as overt racism, were some of the biggest issues faced by the Civil Rights generation, while unemployment, police brutality and incarceration, and relationships between men and women, as well as a new form of

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<sup>29</sup> Two examples are baseball star Barry Bonds with his often cited refusal to cooperate with news reporters, and football and baseball star Deion Sanders and his showmanship on the football field. They represent black athletes who do not feel beholden to whites for allowing them to compete.

racism that works under the guise of equality, are the most important issues for the Hip Hop generation.

By paying minimal attention to rap music and rappers, Kitwana's work lays a strong foundation for understanding the impact Hip Hop has on the people who participate in it by its role in shaping their identity and views on politics, romance, economics and other issues. His purpose is to show how Hip Hop empowers its members, contrary to the claims that it is destructive to those who engage it. Although Kitwana shows that the majority of the members of Hip Hop culture are not professional artists but rather positive members of society in various industries, he does not allow them to speak in his book: he mentions only a few politicians and activists<sup>30</sup>. My research seeks to focus on those young adults with the Hip Hop identity that Kitwana introduces, specifically those who are not mainstream artists but still view Hip Hop as the most definitive part of their identity.

In his second book, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wiggers, Wankstas, Wannabees and the New Reality of Race in America* (2005), Kitwana focuses on the ability of Hip Hop culture to help raise political awareness and its potential to improve race relations in the United States. Kitwana seeks to understand why young whites are the major consumers of rap music and what draws them to it and to Hip Hop culture. He draws on Wimsatt's book *Bomb the Suburbs: Graffiti, Race, Freight-hopping and the Search for Hip-Hop's Moral Center* (1993) that claims that the relationship between

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<sup>30</sup> Kitwana discusses Ras Baraka and Jesse Jackson Jr. as representatives of Hip Hop generation activists who were literally born out of the Civil Rights Movement; Baraka being the son of Black Arts Movement poet Amiri Baraka and Jesse Jackson Jr. being the son of Civil Rights Leader Jesse Jackson.

white Americans and Hip Hop is more complicated than simply being consumers. In Wimsatt's book, he describes 4 different classifications of whites who listen to Hip Hop:

1. Those who study, participate, and believe in the intricacies of Hip Hop culture; those known as "Hip Hop Heads"<sup>31</sup>;
2. Those whose contact is secondhand and limited mainly to the music;
3. Those who listen to rap music, along with whatever other music is popular among their peers;
4. Those who like the music and try to imitate its personas, while having no connection to blacks or negative views of blacks as a race (Wimsatt 1993).

To examine Wimsatt's 4 classifications, Kitwana interviewed whites who listened to Hip Hop to determine their motivations. He focused on white Hip Hop Heads, highlighting the possibility that their involvement in Hip Hop might improve racial politics of the United States by producing young whites as conscious of racial oppression and as invested in equality as their black peers. Kitwana claims that white Hip Hop heads are more likely to be socially conscious and involved in activism and that the racial integration of the Hip Hop community has the possibility to bring the nation out of its old racial politics and into a new era of democracy and equality.

What Kitwana does not acknowledge, however, is that the majority of white consumers of rap music are not the Hip Hop Heads that he claims have so much potential to change racial politics. He does accomplish speaking to Hip Hop Heads to

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<sup>31</sup> Wimsatt did not coin the term "Hip Hop Head" (it emerged within the culture to describe members), but he was among the first to refer to it in scholarship.

learn what Hip Hop means to them. While Kitwana's work focused specifically on white Hip Hop heads, my research seeks to continue the discussion with all members of Hip Hop culture to understand what it means to them.

To date, the work that best shows the diversity of membership within Hip Hop culture is Jeff Chang's *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop* (2006). The book is a collection of essays, transcripts from interviews and panel discussions, and song/poem lyrics that show the diversity and complexity of Hip Hop culture. Chang states that his purpose is to highlight the aesthetics of the culture, which he believes have taken a back seat to many social agendas.<sup>32</sup> As editor, Chang does not privilege any one understanding of Hip Hop over others and, as a result, the contributions in the anthology are often contradictory, again showing the underlying complexity of Hip Hop.

Chang's overall goal is to highlight Hip Hop as a culture composed of very creative and powerful art forms. His motivation is to refute the critics who are still reluctant to acknowledge Hip Hop's aesthetics.

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<sup>32</sup> Many books about Hip Hop use Hip Hop to talk about race, gender, and class relations, generational conflict, the plight of black music, exploitation by media and other issues.

He uses the voices of different artists to show the culture's influence on dance, photography, theater, poetry, painting, fashion and graphic design, music and many other forms of artistic expression.

The purpose of my research is to continue the work begun by scholars like Kitwana and Chang that highlight the aspects of Hip Hop culture not highly visible through mainstream media. My argument is that mainstream representations of Hip Hop culture do not reflect the views of the culture's members. While Chang highlights Hip Hop from the artists' perspective, I plan to explore it from the perspectives of its non-artist culture bearers. I am not implying that the members of Hip Hop culture in my research do not participate in the artistic elements of the culture: most of them do, but as a hobby or passion rather than a primary career. In addition to Hip Hop specific research, I also reviewed relevant literature concerning black culture to help provide a historical perspective that could help situate Hip Hop within the lineage of Black cultural expression.



## 2.4 Black Culture

The consensus among scholars who do consider Hip Hop to be a culture, like Michael Eric Dyson, Robin D.G. Kelley, Tricia Rose and others, is that Hip Hop is black culture not only because the majority of its members are black, but also because it developed out of black cultural traditions that trace to ancient African civilizations and to the more recent Black Power and subsequently the Black Arts Movements (B.A.M.) of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Black Arts Movement scholar Larry Neal, BAM artists rejected the philosophy held by western thinkers that art should be abstract and thus, artists should be alienated from their communities (Neal 1968). He further claims that the Black Arts Movement was founded on the Black Power concept that black people need to define themselves and their world on their own terms, and not those of their oppressors. With this foundation, black poets, photographers, dancers, musicians, novelists, and other artists felt an obligation to ensure that their art spoke directly to the spiritual, cultural and political needs of black people.

This movement sought to establish a “black aesthetic” separate from the traditional western aesthetic, with a new history, symbols, myth and legends to which artists should be beholden. The purpose of the black aesthetic was to help blacks gain a better sense of community and detach from the western ideas of individualism that have been detrimental to black people’s efforts for equality and liberation in the United States. Neal acknowledges that the Black Aesthetic encompasses not only the African American tradition, but also various traditions from the rest of the Third World (Neal 1968). He acknowledges Frantz Fanon, Ron (Maulana) Karenga and others, who insisted on the

importance of culture in revolution movements and he includes Karenga's seven criteria for culture:

1. Mythology
2. History
3. Social Organization
4. Political Organization
5. Economic Organization
6. Creative Motif
7. Ethos

Neal uses excerpts from plays and poems by Amiri Baraka as well as other Black Arts Movement artists to show how black poetry and theater began to increasingly target blacks as an audience and deal with their struggles in the United States. Neal argues that the responsibility of black artists is to make art that helps black people see the world in terms of their own interests for purposes of self-empowerment and improvement through reflective criticism and praise (Neal 1968). He concludes that the black aesthetic established through the BAM draws on a variety of influences from Shine and Stagolee to Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X (Neal 1968).

My argument is that, despite the denial of Hip Hop as culture by critics and much of the general public, it satisfies the criteria for culture laid out by artists of the Black Arts Movement. I assert that Hip Hop was birthed from the Black Arts Movement and continues the tradition of the black aesthetic. While acknowledging Hip Hop's foundation in the Black Aesthetic established by the artists of the Black Arts Movement,

I also argue that, over time, Hip Hop has evolved and now also reflects sentiments of what Trey Ellis calls the New Black Aesthetic.

According to Ellis, the New Black Aesthetic dismisses a singular definition of Blackness that was associated with the militancy of the black power movement (Ellis 1989). He asserts that blacks growing up without the constraints of legal segregation are free to express their blackness through their art without limiting it to traditional black influences in music, poetry, literature and other art forms. He introduces the term “cultural mulatto” to describe young blacks who are shaped by culture with diverse class and racial influences. He argues that these cultural mulattos fuel the New Black Aesthetic by presenting alternatives to the traditional representations of Black culture (Ellis 1989).

Other writers, like Mark Anthony Neal and Nelson George, have used concepts of Ellis’ New Black Aesthetic to make claims about Black culture in the Post-Soul/ Post Civil-Rights Era. In *Buppies, B-boys, Baps & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (2001), George begins his discussion of Post-Soul Black Culture in 1971 with the premiere of Melvin Van Peebles’ film *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, claiming that it took Black culture in a new direction with its portrayal of rebellious black heroism that would characterize the state of young Blacks experiencing freedom from the constraints of legal segregation. George also includes many other significant events and people including Muhammad Ali’s religious commitment to Islam, his refusal to enter the United States draft, his poetic arrogance and his activism. George claims that Ali embodied the spirit of Blacks in the post-Soul era that birthed Hip Hop culture. He also

discusses the New York youth gang activity during the 1970s that had at least 315 gangs and over 19,000 members, the largest being the Black Spades of the South Bronx whose leader went by the name Afrika Bambaataa. George ends his chronicle in 1991 with such events as N.W.A's album *Niggaz4Life* reaching No. 1 on the billboard chart, Disney's use of Graffiti Style letters for the logo of their film *True Identity*, *Newsweek's* cover story on Afrocentrism and many others to show how influential Hip Hop was to both black culture and American popular culture in the 1990s. In the chapter about B-boys and the development of Hip Hop, George clarifies the misnomer that Hip Hop culture started with the recording of Sugar Hill Gang's song "Rapper's Delight." He pinpoints the early 1970s for the foundation of Hip Hop culture, discussing how the scene developed despite rejection from older and middle class blacks who saw Hip Hop not as a continuation of the traditions of the Black Arts Movement but as a perpetuation of stereotypes<sup>33</sup>. George claims that many of those who rejected Hip Hop culture had bought into European ideas of what constituted "High Art," and Hip Hop, with its raw unrestrained expression, did not fit the criteria.

George discusses Hip Hop's influence on popular culture, as well as the elements of previous generations of Black culture that helped to create Hip Hop, acknowledging as other scholars have, the influences within Hip Hop that range from characters in Blaxploitation films like *The Mack* to political leaders like Marcus Garvey and also those not considered to be historically Black, like classical dance and European

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<sup>33</sup> The class based critique of Hip Hop from members of the Civil Rights generation holds that Hip Hop celebrates black "underclass" culture that is deemed uncivilized, uneducated, and counter productive to the goals of blacks to gain equality because the representations of Hip Hop can be used to bolster the argument that blacks are undeserving of full citizenship rights.

electronic music<sup>34</sup>. He discusses the cultural diversity of the post-Soul generation that expanded the definition of Blackness that was very narrow in the age of legal segregation, but it still remains that Hip Hop culture has a “Ghettocentricity” because of the specific conditions under which it manifested. This “Ghettocentricity” reflects the shift in focus of Black culture from the rural South that dominated representations during the Civil Rights era to the urban north that was marked by concentrated poverty, after legal segregation. Speaking not only about Hip Hop but also about the social climate after the Civil Rights movement that he designates as the Post-Soul era, George discusses how the failures of the Civil Rights Legislation to address the concerns of inhabitants in northern cities caused Blacks to search for new alliances and identities politically, historically, culturally, and spiritually. He claims that diversity within Hip Hop culture and the young blacks it represents, reflects the many different places that Blacks in the Post-Soul era have settled both environmentally and ideologically.

There have also been scholars that view Hip Hop as not only black culture but more specifically black music culture because of the importance of rap music. In *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (2003), Guthrie P. Ramsey traces Hip Hop’s artform of rapping to oral traditions of the dozens<sup>35</sup> and toasting<sup>36</sup> singing, preaching, and poetry. Ramsey changes his focus though to center on how Hip Hop

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<sup>34</sup> Afrika Bambaataa used elements from the German Electro music group Kraftwerk for the classic Hip Hop song “Planet Rock.”

<sup>35</sup> The dozens are a practice within the African American oral tradition where competitors take turns non-maliciously insulting each others family members, usually the mother, until one has no response.

<sup>36</sup> Toasting is practice within Jamaican musical genres of dancehall, lover’s rock, reggae, dub and ska of talking melodically over a rhythm or beat using either improvised or pre-written lyrics. Within African American oral tradition, this practice I used specifically for storytelling, with story content usually telling the exploits of some folk hero outwitting some adversary.

music has shaped the cultural identity of the 1990s for blacks and the cultural memory of that era since then. His position is that scholars who study Black music culture are doing ethnomusicology, which studies music within the social context in which it exists, because of the significance of black music to black culture.

He discusses the impact of Hip Hop scores on movies, like Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, to show how music becomes symbolic of things within the culture beyond the lyrics of the songs, to encompass the political, artistic and cultural positions of young blacks during that era. He discusses the commodification of Hip Hop that he claims to be indicative of the way that Black culture, as expressed through black music, has always been viewed as the source of style in American culture. His discussion of commodification describes what the process does to essentialize and establish an "authentic" blackness through corporate perceptions of black youth culture, showing how it is often limited to racialized images connected to pleasure and danger associated with black culture. He evaluates the use of Hip Hop culture, specifically rap music representations in mainstream culture, in a quest to learn what messages are being sent and received about black culture through these artforms.

Also connecting black music to black culture, in *What The Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*, Neal connected the traditions of resistance for black people to the tradition of black music, arguing that the struggles have always been expressed through music and serve as an oral history chronicling the lineage of Blacks in the United States (Neal 1968). He discusses the importance of musicians during the Civil Rights Movement to help transport messages not only throughout the black

communities but also to the American public and the global communities of color who became interested in the plight of Blacks in the United States. Speaking about Hip Hop, Neal views it as a social and political outlet for young black youth in the same tradition of music during the civil rights movement. Like Ramsey, Neal discusses the commodification of Hip Hop culture that leads to cultural exploitation because of the expressions of style that were presented by rap artists via clothing, jewelry, automobiles and other luxury items. However, he concludes that it is still a resistance culture, claiming that Hip Hop ultimately represents the continued struggle for blacks to create their own forms of cultural expression transmitted through musical narratives that provides an internal critique and praise of the conditions of Blacks among themselves and in relation to the larger society.

Further commenting on the commodification of Black culture, and Hip Hop specifically, is the work by Greg Tate, *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture* (2003). In this work, Tate discusses how easy it is to commodify Hip Hop style because of the consumer goods that have become symbols of authenticity within the culture, but he argues that the substance of the culture is rarely understood by the Whites who adopt Hip Hop symbols as representatives of popular culture without knowing their significance. He focuses on the phenomenon of the White rap artist Eminem and compares him to other White artists who have performed Black music, like Elvis Presley and Benny Goodman. The difference though, between Eminem and other whites who have been successful in performing Black music, is the acceptance and respect that Eminem gets within the Hip Hop community because of the

belief that he embodies culture's premise of resistance and rebellion through his rejection of the title "white rapper." I hold that the acceptance of Eminem as a member of Hip Hop culture indicates important realities about how Hip Hop identity is developed and validated in ways not specifically tied to racial identity because of the significant number of members that are not Black, but recognize that they are participating in Black culture that avoid appropriating its stereotypical representations. In his book *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabees, and the new Reality of Race in America* (2005), Bakari Kitwana dialogs with white members of Hip Hop culture who most often connect their involvement to their passions for either artistic expression or social justice issues. In addition, in his book *Bomb The Suburbs: Graffiti, Race, and Frieight-hopping, and the Search for Hip Hop's Moral Center* (1993), William Wimsett differs between whites who are casual listeners of Hip Hop culture who are more likely to commodify the culture's artforms without understanding their greater meaning and those whites deeply invested in Hip Hop and understand its importance to the legacy of Black culture and their responsibility to participate with integrity and resist turning it into spectacle.



## 2.5 Conclusion

Early scholarship focused on the history of Hip Hop culture by showing how its four artforms developed. When rap music became popular with mainstream audiences, research shifted from observations of breaking and graffiti to analyses of rap music lyrics, and held it to be the best way for readers to learn about Hip Hop culture. The resulting scholarship was limited to content analysis of rap music lyrics and music video images, neglecting the other artforms and members of Hip Hop. Most research about rap music and rappers assumed that the rap music available to the general public was an accurate representation of the artists and the rest of Hip Hop culture, until Tricia Rose's work suggested otherwise. Rose and scholars like Russell Potter and Robin D.G. Kelly began to critique the way Hip Hop was being studied by white social scientists, claiming their analyses of the culture ignored its aesthetic and misrepresented it to support their views about the problems with black culture and stereotypes of young minorities. To combat the misrepresentations of Hip Hop culture that began to dominate the literature, scholars from the Hip Hop community emerged to defend and redefine Hip Hop. Bakari Kitwana, Jeff Chang and others have taken the focus of Hip Hop studies away from the rappers and rap music to show a more complete and accurate representation of the culture. What continues to be absent from Hip Hop scholarship though, are the views of the majority of the culture's members, those who are not mainstream artists.

In becoming familiar with the existing canon of academic work concerning Hip Hop culture and its art forms and ideologies, I found a large number of scholars using Hip Hop to make arguments about verbal and non-verbal communication, gender

politics, social movements, race relations and various other subjects. Scholars like John McWhorter, a linguist, and Michael Eric Dyson, a theologian, have both gained a considerable amount of attention for their work on Hip Hop; McWhorter being one of Hip Hop's biggest academic critics and Dyson being one of its biggest academic supporters. Their work on Hip Hop however, rarely connects to their specific areas of expertise and is written more as social critique than academic text. Although I view it as positive that the social sciences have begun a dialogue about Hip Hop, the literature rarely allows Hip Hop to speak for itself. By this I mean that Hip Hop is studied by those outside of the culture without respect to the norms and values that exist within it; the most important being its fluidity. As a result, the scholarship tends to reflect scholars' conservative or liberal positions on Black youth, sub culture, popular music, grassroots arts movements and all other categories where Hip Hop is placed, limiting the culture to merely a case study highlighting some larger social issue.

After reading literature on Hip Hop that goes back to the early 1990s<sup>37</sup>, I have noticed that the focus has been on rap music, whether it be an analysis of the language and structure contained within songs to make arguments about the poetical brilliance of Hip Hop emcees or a content analysis of song lyrics to make arguments about topics ranging from misogyny and violence to revolution and justice. In addition to focusing on mainly the musical aspect of Hip Hop, the research is further limited to the music with the most visibility in the mainstream. As a result, other artists and members of the community are rarely included in studies on Hip Hop, if people are studied at all,

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<sup>37</sup> Most of the writing on Hip Hop before the 1990s was journalistic, rather than scholarship, with more observations and opinion than theoretical analysis.

because the tendency so far has been to study the cultural products of Hip Hop, instead of the people who produce the culture's artforms and perpetuate its ideals. When people within the culture are the focus, it is mostly mainstream representations of the artists that scholars use for analysis. These studies assume that mainstream representations of Hip Hop are accurate and ignore the numerous responses from within the culture critiquing the mainstream representations that suggest otherwise.

Within cultural studies, there is a large body of work that connects Hip Hop to the tradition of resistance through musical cultural expression that traces back to slavery and contemporarily to the Black Power Movement. The connections to the Black Power and Black Arts Movements support arguments that Hip Hop is indicative of Post Civil Rights Black Culture made by scholars who acknowledge the influence of Hip Hop in shaping the views of Blacks in this new era. While Kitwana uses the term Hip Hop Generation to describe this group, other scholars, like Nelson George and Mark Anthony Neal, have used terms like post-Soul. What these scholars do point out, about Hip Hop and its members, is how they have a wide variety of influences that have resulted in new presentations of Blackness that did not exist for the previous generation. They also show how their relationship with Hip Hop is reciprocal: while the older members of this Post Civil Rights era shaped Hip Hop culture, it later became the model for younger members who developed a Hip Hop identity.

### 3. METHODOLOGY: HOW I WILL STUDY HIP HOP

#### 3.1. Research Design

The research was conducted between June 2007 and May 2009, with the initial goal to gather 30 interviews via snowball sample<sup>38</sup>. Because of the diversity of my sample, my participants did not feel the necessity to specify a specific gender, race/ethnicity, income or education level, geographic location or political affiliation. Their self-identification as members of Hip Hop culture was the only guaranteed link among participants. These interviews were conducted both in person and via Internet chat services,<sup>39</sup> took between one and three hours and were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Because I am a member of Hip Hop culture, I began my snowball with my personal network. I asked friends who are also members of Hip Hop culture if they would agree to an interview and then asked them for at least five other members that they thought would be willing to grant me an interview.

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<sup>38</sup> Snowball sampling is a technique used for developing a research sample where existing participants recruit potential participants from among their social networks. This sampling technique is often used for populations to which researchers may not have easy access. Even though I am a member of Hip Hop culture, I decided to use a snowball sampling technique to insure that I did not limit my participants to my own social circle.

<sup>39</sup> Programs like America Online Instant Messenger and iChat allow video and audio conferencing where people can speak face to face, using their webcams or listen to each other using their computer speakers.

### 3.2 Coding

The interviews were coded along the theme represented by the following questions.

1. What is Hip Hop?
2. How are you involved in it?
3. How important is it to you?
4. What do you think of Hip Hop's current state and future direction?
5. Do you think the representations of Hip Hop are accurate?
6. Who is responsible for protecting Hip Hop?
7. Is Hip Hop dead?

After completing the interviews, I transcribed them and coded the responses pertaining to these themes. After all the interviews were coded, I compiled similar responses, and highlighted specific quotations that most accurately capture the general sentiment expressed. Responses that differed from the trend were coded and presented, so as to not ignore views that differ from the majority consensus. Additional themes that arose from the responses, beyond the specific ones that I listed, will also be acknowledged, but presented as beyond the scope of this particular project and as possibilities for further research.

### 3.3 Sample

Hip Hop culture has an obsession with the 1980s, and rightfully so, because it is the first full decade of the culture's existence and the one in which it went from local to global recognition. The strong connection to this decade signifies authentication by both those who claim to be products of it and those who are children of it--all referring to themselves as "80s babies"<sup>40</sup>. For my project, however, I am using the term "80s babies" literally, to designate the second generation of Hip Hop culture. The concept of Hip Hop generations is borrowed from Hip Hop writer Bakari Kitwana.

Although Kitwana's designation of the Hip Hop generations is useful for understanding the social views and identity politics concerning the first post civil-rights generation of Black Americans, I hold that his designation is too broad when specifically discussing Hip Hop for three reasons. First, the years that Kitwana designates make it possible to have two familial generations within the Hip Hop Generation. Second, Kitwana's Hip Hop generation neglects many of the culture's pioneers who were born during legal segregation but are responsible for creating and developing Hip Hop culture in the 1970s. Lastly, Kitwana uses Hip Hop as a representative of the social conditions of the United States after legal segregation, specifically shaping Blacks, but I hold that Hip Hop culture is multicultural, thus embodying some dynamics that are beyond the scope of Kitwana's work. Using Kitwana's ideas as a starting point, however, I have decided to focus my attention on a specific generation within Hip Hop, a culture I hold to be multigenerational. When I discuss members of Hip Hop culture, I am referring to

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<sup>40</sup> Rapper AZ, born in 1972, refers to himself as an "80s baby" in his song "The Game Don't Stop," Rapper Jay-z, born in 1968, refers to himself as an "80s baby" in the song "Go Crazy (remix)."

those that recognize Hip Hop culture as a major component of their identity and participate in a lifestyle shaped by its ideals. With that premise, I argue that currently, Hip Hop culture encompasses four generations.

The first generation is the “pioneers,” those born before 1968, during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that heavily influenced Hip Hop culture. I designate these members as pioneers because they were born before Hip Hop existed and are responsible for its initial inception in the 1970s. The second generation is the “alchemists,” those born between 1968-1977. I use the term “alchemists” to describe them because they are responsible for Hip Hop’s “Golden Era,” a period that extended from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s. They also represent the first generation of members of Hip Hop culture who were born after legal segregation, thereby becoming the first post Civil Rights generation. For my research, I use 1968 as the beginning of the post Civil Rights era, unlike Kitwana who uses 1964, because 1968 marked the official end of the Civil Rights Legislation with the Fair Housing Act<sup>41</sup> that was passed that year.

The third generation, the “80’s Babies,” were born between 1978-1987. Members of this generation inherited Hip Hop from the “pioneers” and “alchemists” and spent their adolescence in Hip Hop’s rise from an underground to a dominant mainstream cultural influence because of the wide variety of representations of Hip Hop culture that existed on television and radio. The fourth generation is “millenniums,” those born between 1988-1997. Members of this generation participate in a form of Hip Hop

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<sup>41</sup> The act outlawed the refusal to rent or sell a dwelling to any person on the basis of race, color, religion or nationality.

heavily influenced by the technical advances that have been made in their lifetime<sup>42</sup>. Because of the new innovations that this generation has infused with Hip Hop culture, they are often blamed for its decline because they have abandoned certain original techniques for new, more highly technological ones<sup>43</sup>. As a result, they have opened up a dialogue that exposes differences in the ideologies of older and younger members of the culture. The split has two camps: one believes that the “millenniums” understanding of Hip Hop culture is not reflective of its initial intentions and that their participation is leading to the destruction of the culture’s integrity; the other camp believes that the “millenniums” are a direct result of the teachings of previous generations and view their participation as a sign of the culture’s progress and ability to adapt to the changing times to maintain its purpose of reflecting the sentiments of Black youth.

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<sup>42</sup> The growth of dependence on computers and Internet, along with the popularity of digital media like .mp3 music, audio files and avi. video files, make the world more accessible.

<sup>43</sup> A few examples are computer DJ interfaces, an alternative to using vinyl, and computer programs, which are now able to simulate real instruments and are used to create beats.



### **3.4 Conclusion**

This project focuses on “80s babies” because they are now young adults beginning to look critically at Hip Hop culture and are recognizing their responsibility to carry on its traditions and teach them to future generations, as well as seeing their opportunity to begin developing their legacy and identity within the culture. A primary criterion for the “80s babies” included in this project is self-identification as having membership in Hip Hop culture. As mentioned before, previous research concerning Hip Hop culture has focused mainly on artists, ignoring the majority of the culture’s members who are not visible in current mainstream representations of Hip Hop. Though there are “80s babies” in this study who do participate in Hip Hop’s art forms at various levels, the majority of them have chosen career paths that may include, but are not limited to, the Hip Hop industry. Among the “80s babies” are artists and industry executives, but also many professionals in academia, engineering, law, culinary arts, and technology, as well as blue-collar workers, retail sales and automotive service, as well as representatives from other industries. The majority of “80s babies” in this study do participate in Hip Hop artforms, but more as a passion than as their main source of income.

The purpose of this study is to uncover what Hip Hop means to this generation of its members, and to uncover what they understand the culture to be and how they negotiate their positions within it. I hope to learn how they view the previous generations’ successes and failures, as well as the responsibilities they feel they have, if any, to future generations to make sure that the culture continues to be the positive

influence that they claim it to be. I wish to explore how they assess the current state of the culture and the participation of younger members. As a result, responses of the “80s babies” are organized to show both common understanding of certain aspects of Hip Hop culture and areas where there are countless perspectives and tireless debates. The analysis will also connect the themes that arise in my data to larger sociological themes dealing with culture and identity.

#### 4. RESULTS: HIP HOP ACCORDING TO THE 80s BABIES

##### 4.1 What Is Hip Hop?

Initially, there were many questions about how accurately I would be able to research a supposed culture without imposing a definition of it upon participants to insure that the “80s babies” fit the criteria for membership. It is my position that within Hip Hop, there is a tacit understanding among group members and those familiar with the culture about what Hip Hop is and is not<sup>44</sup>. The problem with that tacit definition though, is that those who do not share it instead use what they see in mainstream media representations to form their definitions of Hip Hop. As a result, the general public’s understanding of Hip Hop conflicts with that of the culture’s members. Thus, the first step in this research was to find out what Hip Hop is, according to the “80s babies.” Although they expressed their understandings in different ways, they had similar views about what Hip Hop was in terms of its purpose and foundations and what it meant to them in terms of their identities.

Some of the “80s babies” used emcees’ words to express their understandings. Scott, a marketing grad student and music producer, used the words of legendary Hip Hop emcee and pioneer KRS-One<sup>45</sup> as he rhymed:

Hip Hop Means to Know, it’s a form of intelligence. To be Hip is to be up to date and relevant.

Hop is a form of movement. You can’t just observe a hop, you got to hop up and do it. Hip and

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<sup>44</sup> My position was supported when potential participants declined interviews on the grounds that they were not invested deeply enough in Hip Hop to be considered members of the culture

<sup>45</sup> KRS-One is recognized as one of the most influential emcees in Hip Hop because of his commitment to embody the essence of the culture and his commitment to ensuring that Hip Hop continue to be a positive force with his participation in the Stop The Violence movements, his creation of the Temple of Hip Hop, and continuing to put out albums that promote Hip Hop culture.

Hop is more than the music. Hip is the knowledge, Hop is the movement. Hip and Hop is intelligent movement, or relevant music. We sellin' the music, so write this down on your black books and journals, Hip Hop culture is eternal. Run and tell your friends, an ancient civilization has been born again.

Using KRS-One's words to articulate his views, Scott claims Hip Hop to be something cerebral and not primitive, as it is often portrayed. KRS-One's definition also shows how Scott's understanding of Hip Hop extends beyond music to be a movement that reflects ancient civilization and infuses it with current conditions. Although it is not explicitly said here, the ancient civilizations KRS-One references in his lyrics are those on the continent of Africa<sup>46</sup>; thus, this connection places Hip Hop as something specifically related to an African identity and a source of racial pride for Black youth.

Scott's use of KRS-One's words is one example of how the "80s babies" inherited Hip Hop culture from previous generations through memorization and recitation of song lyrics. Instead of using their own words, many of them, at some point in their interviews, referenced both "pioneers" and "alchemists" as the source for their understanding of the culture's foundation. Speaking specifically about what Hip Hop is, KRS-One and Afrika Bambaataa were the most commonly referenced pioneering emcees with many of the "80s babies" being hesitant to use their own words out of respect for those who have already defined the culture. Roger, a playwright, youth theater director, and emcee said:

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<sup>46</sup> Ancient African civilizations commonly mentioned by KRS-One and other emcees are Kush, Nubia, and Egypt.

My definition of Hip Hop isn't different from the zulu nation<sup>47</sup>; love peace unity and having fun, appreciating and upholding the elements. The elements are breaking which is commonly called breakdancing; breakers, they put the move into the movement. Then you have emceeing or rap, DJing or turntablism, graffiti art or aerosol writing and the fifth element [which] is the knowledge.

All of the “80s babies” made reference to the five elements that Roger refers to as being the foundations of the culture, the same elements discussed in scholarship that focuses on tracing present manifestations of Hip Hop back to its origins (George 1998; Chang 2005). The “80s babies” acknowledgement of and adherence to the foundation laid by the “pioneers” and innovations made by the “alchemists” shows the success of the oral tradition within Hip Hop culture in terms of passing on its values and norms, because although the “80s babies” quoted the words heard through song lyrics and conversation, none discussed any studies that were influential in teaching them about Hip Hop. This dynamic helps to explain why there is such a focus on rap music within Hip Hop culture, because it is seen as the main way that the culture’s messages, history and traditions are transmitted among members and to those outside the world of Hip Hop. Many scholars have looked at how African Americans and other enslaved civilizations used music as a part of the oral tradition to preserve and perpetuate their culture, since slaves were forbidden to read or write. In this way, the rap music element of Hip Hop culture serves as folk music to perpetuate and preserve black culture in the post Civil Rights era via rap lyrics and music samples contained within rap music production. When producers and

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<sup>47</sup> The Zulu Nation was originally the Black Spades street gang. Afrika Bambaataa, its leader, decided to use the influence of the gang to do positive things in his community, using Hip Hop to draw youth away from gangs and toward positive activities like the arts of graffiti writing, breaking and turntablism.

DJs sample songs, they introduce Hip Hop listeners to some of the most popular and influential artists of previous eras. Some of these musicians include Aretha Franklin, James Brown<sup>48</sup>, Nina Simone, and others who exemplified the social consciousness of the civil rights generation through their music. The use of rap music to transmit knowledge of Hip Hop culture shows that it is rooted in Black cultural traditions that extend beyond the five elements that comprise it to those that were started during the slave trade.

Although the “80s babies” all acknowledged the five elements of Hip Hop culture as comprising the foundation, they also expressed what Hip Hop means to them beyond those five elements, claiming that just listing them does not accurately express what role Hip Hop plays in their lives. Curtis, a software engineer, expressed that for him, there is a spiritual element within Hip Hop, as he explained:

Hip Hop is all about a feeling, its kind of like religion. You have Christians, Jews et cetera and they're all basically delivering the same message, but the way it's delivered connects more with some people than others. That's how Hip Hop is. It has four artforms that all touch people differently. For me, I connect most with the DJ because that was the first element that I was introduced to. Other people might connect more with graffiti or breakdancing or emceeing but it all stems from those [artforms] and the teaching of the fifth element, which is knowledge of self.

It's the knowledge that allows us all to find the artform we connect with.

Like Curtis, many of the “80s babies” acknowledged that, although Hip Hop has specific elements that form its basis, the importance of it cannot be concretely defined because

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<sup>48</sup> James Brown is the most frequently sampled artist in Hip Hop with emcees across the gamut containing political, conscious, party, gangsta, and all other types of rap music from artists in each category like Public Enemy, Queen Latifah, LL Cool J, A Tribe Called Quest, 2 Live Crew, Ice T, Tupac, Mc Lyte, N.W.A, Digable Planets, Kid N Play, and countless others. James Brown's song “Funky Drummer” alone has been sampled over 100 times for Hip Hop beats.

everyone experiences it differently and as a result, many of them described Hip Hop using metaphors and analogies, literary devices characteristic of Hip Hop language that show how much Hip Hop influences their daily behavior through its influence on their speech. Because of the difficulty in concretely defining Hip Hop, many scholars have placed it within the classification of post modern culture, not only because its artforms defy the rules of traditional artforms like poetry, dance, literature, music production and visual arts, but also because of the subjectivity upon which it is based. Critics of this classification of Hip Hop culture form critiques on the basis that claims of Hip Hop to be postmodern ignore the history of Black culture operating on different premises than western culture. It is seen as too diverse to be captured in one definition, if for no other reason than Black culture developed differently, depending on geographic region and rural and urban environments. Critics claim it is ignoring this important dynamic of Black culture that has led many to define it as postmodern, in comparison to white culture that is defined as modern.

Of the extensive material in KRS-One's catalog, Scott chose some that suggest an inherent connection between Hip Hop and Black culture, even though he is not black. Though Scott did not go into detail about this aspect of Hip Hop, others explicitly connected Hip Hop to their racial identity. Donald, a law student and emcee, responded to the question "what is Hip Hop" in this way:

It's our soul, [it's] serenity, this music, this lifestyle we call Hip Hop, is one of the few things that our people, African Americans, can actually claim ownership over. Arguably of course but, it is the proof that nothing in life is impossible to achieve. It's a way for us to see ourselves in all our glory, and some of our faults, and to be inspired.

For Donald and many of the “80s babies,” Hip Hop is a lifestyle, something that is reflected in every aspect of daily life, as well as something that belongs to Black people as an undeniable example of their contributions to American culture. Although he acknowledges that the perspective of Hip Hop being black is debatable, he strongly holds it as such. Charles, a full time DJ and freelance graphic designer, echoed Donald’s sentiments, saying:

Hip Hop embodies the existence of the African American; our struggles, prosperity, joy, pain and all other aspects of everyday life in the same way black music and black culture always have. Hip Hop is just our generation’s way. I got something new, even though, it might not be of value to you, it’s mine and I want to show it to you. Hip Hop is our channel, our way to tell the world about who we are.

For Charles, Hip Hop is his generation’s means of expression the same way that Gospel, Blues, Jazz, Rock and Soul music were for previous generations of Blacks. Whereas for Donald, Hip Hop is something with an esoteric connection to his understanding of Blackness, Charles connects it to a specific tradition of Black music and Black culture. Hasaan, a loan officer, also connects Hip Hop to Black cultural tradition but in a way distinct from Charles. For Hasaan, Hip Hop has a very specific role in the continuing struggle for Blacks to gain freedom. He emphatically insisted:

Hip Hop is the culture, a piece of the movement, the new casting from cats in the previous movements of struggle to a new form of revolution. It came out of the Black Panthers and the Nation of Gods and Earths<sup>49</sup>, the Malcolm X’s and Fannie Lou Hamers, the Nat Turners and

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<sup>49</sup> This group was started in Harlem New York in 1964 by ex Nation of Islam member Charles 13x. It also referred to the 5% nation because of the premise that 85% of the world are deaf, dumb, and blind, while 10% control all of the resources and it is the remaining 5% that are the poor righteous teachers who are responsible for enlightening the 85% living in darkness. It teaches that Blacks are the original people,



Harriet Tubmans, the Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurstons, the Garveys and all of them. It was exported through the hoods for all of us to take part in and it encompassed the arts of breaking, graffiti, emceeing, djing and others like martial arts to link us together so we could build solidarity so each one could teach one with these different languages and we could start building as a people. It's a lifestyle, something that now you're born into, that you grow to love to a point where you'll die for it

Hasaan's statement goes further than Charles' and gives Hip Hop a place in a storied tradition of struggle and resistance, placing responsibility on its current and future generations to uphold the legacy in which it was created. The majority of the "80s babies" in the study were Black and spoke in passing or in depth about Hip Hop being inherently connected to Black culture, but they also acknowledged that it was multicultural by mentioning the pioneering members who were not Black<sup>50</sup> and discussing how Hip Hop exists globally in Asian, European and South American countries<sup>51</sup>. Hasaan traces Hip Hop back to traditions of resistance, and other scholars have done the same. Some scholars trace it back to West African storytelling and art traditions and to the resistance from the slavery era, but contemporary scholars tie Hip Hop to the Black Power movement, which had an element called the Black Arts Movement that attempted to shift the concept of aesthetics from the abstract to the social

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men being referred to as Gods and women being referred to as Earths. The nation seeks to help Black people tap into their spiritual power to help improve their conditions. The nation uses a mix of numerology, astrology, Nation of Islam and traditional Islamic teaching and has its own language, alphabet, number system, code of conduct and teachings.

<sup>50</sup> Many of the pioneering breakdancers and writers were young Latinos and even some Whites. The idea of Hip Hop being Black extends beyond the concept of Black meaning African American because many of the pioneering members of the culture were children of Caribbean immigrants or immigrants themselves.

<sup>51</sup> Much research has been done about how many third world countries use Hip Hop as inspiration for their own resistance and as an outlet for their disenfranchised youths using the model of Hip Hop established in the United States.

context in which black people were living at the time. This “black aesthetic” exhorted artists to use their art to reflect, inspire and engage black culture and maintain Blacks as their primary audience. This connection between art and social movement is one that Hip Hop adopted from the Black Arts Movement of the Civil Rights era. The mention of this tradition shows that the “80s babies” understand and accept the legacy of struggle that is built into Hip Hop culture.

Even the “80s babies” who were not Black acknowledged that Hip Hop was Black culture, but also claimed that there was something about the beauty of it responsible for their being a part of it. Matt, a music producer and personal trainer, said:

I always saw Hip Hop as the voice of black people because of the content that was in the music. Some of those experiences, I wasn’t directly connected to like some of my other friends because I’m white, but I still got the messages and I felt them. I felt the music and the creativity too. The thing that I have to do with Hip Hop is remember that it’s not just about being black but also about being yourself and expressing yourself. I think that’s why I make beats and don’t rhyme, because I express myself through my music and I know its sincere but to be a white rapper, it’s easier to try to be black and anytime you’re trying to be something you’re not; that’s not Hip Hop.

Matt, like the other non-black “80s babies,” agreed that Hip Hop is directly connected to Black culture because of its foundations being Black and Latino disenfranchised youth trying to validate themselves within a society that continued to make them and their conditions invisible. They also agreed that Hip Hop is about something bigger, not limited to Blacks and Black identity, but something that provides all of its members the vehicle to express themselves artistically and be accepted for their originality. Matt also begins the discussion of sincerity within Hip Hop, asserting that the culture is about

fearless self-expression. With Hip Hop being multicultural and being about self-expression, it makes sense that it manifests itself in so many different ways that can all be considered valid. In his book *Everything but the Burden: What Whites are Taking From Black Culture* (2003), Greg Tate addresses how whites have attempted to co-opt Hip Hop culture by presenting watered down forms that are more palatable to white audiences, often in the form of white artists, focusing specifically on the white Hip Hop artist Eminem. Matt and the other white “80s babies” understand and acknowledge the history of white co-optation of Black culture and Black music and make efforts not to confuse their participation with Hip Hop culture with white co-optation. They expressed their disgust for those who use it as an attempt to imitate black culture, because for them it is as an opportunity for them to express themselves.

No matter how the “80s babies” expressed their understanding of Hip Hop, they expressed it as something more than just the music that they listen; rather, it is something that shapes every part of their identity, from their political views to their consumer behavior and circle of friends. For the “80s babies,” Hip Hop is built on five elements but has infinite manifestations and its customization and diversity are part of its beauty and appeal, making it as important as religion and worth living and dying for.

#### 4.2. Developing a Hip Hop Identity

In trying to figure out how Hip Hop became such an influential part of the “80s babies” lives, I asked them how they became associated with Hip Hop and why that association means so much to them. Continuing the connection with racial identity expressed in some of their definitions of Hip Hop, the Black “80s babies” explicitly expressed a collective ownership of Hip Hop, claiming it to be something that was theirs because it was created by black people, and, at the time they were introduced to it, for black people. Anthony, a graphic designer and emcee, expressed how he connected with Hip Hop because it addressed things he was familiar with in his everyday environment, saying:

It was easy for me to relate to [Hip Hop] because it was from people who had the same background as myself, speaking on topics that I understood and or had an interest in learning about. Just being from a black neighborhood and the inner city and the things that come along with that environment, Hip Hop spoke directly to that, spoke directly to me. I can remember hearing NWA, although I hadn’t experienced most of the things that they rapped about personally, I had witnessed them going on in my environment. To witness someone speaking on situations that affect you and your people kept my ears glued to the speakers. The rebellion, the freedom with words and the truth that [emcees] spoke in a way that I could see it with my own eyes was enough for me to know it was for me, it was a part of me before I became a part of it.

Anthony claims that he never had to become a part of Hip Hop culture because Hip Hop and he were birthed from the same conditions. Scholars like Murray Foreman highlight the importance of Hip Hop’s urban location to the culture’s members because of the urban landscape being a center of Black America in the post Civil Rights era, whereas the rural south was the center during previous times (Foreman 2002).

Many of the “80s babies” expressed their connection to Hip Hop being something that they never sought out, but something in which they were immersed involuntarily, and eventually chose to fully embrace. Speaking specifically about how connected to Hip Hop he always felt, Roger said:

When I was a kid, I felt like [Hip Hop] was the best representation of black people that I had ever seen. Not so much today but back then [because] everybody was their own way. Everybody had their own lane and I felt like every artist lived in my neighborhood. I knew people like Will Smith and Jazzy Jeff I knew people like Run-DMC I knew people like N.W.A. and Tribe Called Quest and all of those people had a broad variety. There was a broad variety of artists, even if you look at them they had respect for each other. If you look at when Will Smith and them couldn't accept their Grammy on TV for the first rap award, everybody was on MTV boycotting the Grammy's from Fab 5 Freddy, to Ice-T to Kid-N-Play...Of course there were battles, but that's Hip Hop. Everybody wants to prove that them and their crew are the best but at the end... they were all part of the same community and they could be whoever they wanted to be and it was accepted until corporate interests came in and divided [it]. If there's anything that made me love Hip Hop, it was that overall picture when I was a kid. They were the best examples of Black people. It was the first time I looked at Black people like we're more than only one thing, we're more than just revolutionaries, we're more than gangsters, we're more than people who are around the way, we're more than party animals, more than just goofy kids just trying to find our way. We're like, all the above and more.

Roger expresses that when he initially became exposed to the representations that Hip Hop had in the media, they were more diverse and represented the gamut of not only artists but the aspects of the culture and its people.

Roger initially became involved with Hip Hop because he viewed it as something that reflected the diversity of Black people with which he was familiar. He also claims

that media representations outside of Hip Hop remained limited to traditional stereotypical images<sup>52</sup>. Roger's recollection of the diversity within Hip Hop representations describes a "Golden Era" created by the "Alchemists," the first generation of Blacks growing up without legal segregation. Because of the freedom that they had in comparison with previous generations, scholars like Neal (1999) claim that "the alchemists" developed an understanding of blackness that was not limited to monolithic representations and therefore had influences including, but not limited to, the presentation of militant, aggressive blackness that characterized the Black Power Movement. Neal referred to this group as the "Post Soul" generation. Because of the many different influences shaping their identity, Ellis coined the term "cultural mulatto" to describe them. Describing what a cultural mulatto is, Ellis writes, "Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world" (Ellis 1989). The many different personas within the representations of Hip Hop that Roger describes (hard core, conscious, bohemian, alternative and others), reflect the freedom attributed to the first generation of blacks to grow up without legal segregation.

The "80s babies" who remember becoming interested in Hip Hop during the "Golden Era," when the culture was still developing, often reminisce, as Roger did, about the differences between the representations of Hip Hop they fell in love with to those currently available to the "millenniums" as the basis for their understanding of Hip

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<sup>52</sup> Traditional images present Blacks as violent, hypersexual and unintelligent.

Hop culture. Roger's response is the first of many where the "80s babies" compare the understanding of Hip Hop with which they initially got involved to the current manifestation of it that the "millenniums" embrace. While the "80s babies" claim that the representations of Hip Hop to which they were initially introduced helped to break down stereotypes of young Blacks, they believe that the current mainstream representations help perpetuate them. Current representations of Hip Hop present Black men and women as the modern manifestation of the "Black Buck" and "Jezebel" stereotypes that incited and justified racial hostility and violence, like rape and lynching, perpetrated on blacks in the past.

Roger claims that there was a time where all the different personas within Hip Hop culture were cohesive, and faults the influence of large corporations for the split. Although competition has always been one of the biggest aspects of Hip Hop culture, Roger and other "80s babies" differentiate between friendly competition where the battles were won with artistry and the current manifestation of rap "BEEF"<sup>53</sup> where artists engage in battles with physical violence. When Roger indicts corporate interests for the splintering of Hip Hop, the incident most indicative of his claims is the feud between two of the culture's most heralded emcees, West Coast emcee Tupac Shakur a.k.a. 2pac and East Coast emcee, The Notorious B.I.G a.k.a. Biggie Smalls. This battle began as a feud between the two emcees where they traded blows via songs targeted at each other and their respective crews and record labels. The feud, fueled by mainstream

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<sup>53</sup> The concept of BEEF became popular with the Notorious B.I.G. song "What's Beef," where he used the term to describe a situation of conflict with rivals that gets so large that it consumes every aspect of one's life. It has since been used to describe tension between rappers that goes beyond friendly competition between artists to personal assaults on the other's livelihood and wellbeing.

coverage that presented it as a rivalry between not only the emcees, but also the states and coasts that they represented,<sup>54</sup> resulted in the murder of both emcees within a 6 month time period.<sup>55</sup> Although this feud left Hip Hop without two of its most influential voices, it showed how profitable conflict can be for artists and corporations and foreshadowed the current fascination with Hip Hop BEEF that the “millenniums” embrace and enjoy about the culture.

The line between friendly artistic competition and physical violence within Hip Hop has always been blurry. In *Yes Yes Y'All: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade*<sup>56</sup> (2002), the pioneering members whose views are included in the book recall that Hip Hop was initially connected with youth gangs, admitting that there was a time when the art and violence went hand in hand because most of the B-Boys and aerosol writers used their art to represent their gangs and as a result, dance and art battles often turned violent. The “80s babies” however, are unfamiliar with this aspect of Hip Hop culture, because it existed before their introduction. It is the “pioneers” that they acknowledge are the ones largely responsible for using Hip Hop to curb the gang violence of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The majority of the “80s babies” introduction to Hip Hop culture occurred during the early 1990s when Hip Hop reflected a raised consciousness among Black people with respect

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<sup>54</sup> Many of the employees of urban magazines during that beef have begun to take responsibility for how the spin they put on the stories made them larger than they were and contributed to people becoming emotionally charged about the personal rivalry.

<sup>55</sup> Tupac Shakur was shot 4 times during a drive-by in Las Vegas, Nevada, on September 7, 1996, and died 6 days later from injuries resulting from the gunshot wounds. On March 9, 1997, The Notorious B.I.G. was shot 4 times during a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles, California, and he was pronounced dead less than an hour later at a local hospital.

<sup>56</sup> This book is comprised of first hand accounts of artists and observers of 1970s Hip Hop culture organized into themes to help show readers its climate during that decade.



to their social conditions; this resulted in the Golden Era created by the “alchemists” and their position as cultural mulattos, as well as a resurgence in the Afrocentric movement<sup>57</sup>

That Roger’s understanding of the connection between Hip Hop’s artistic competition and its physical violence differs from that of the “pioneers” shows how the story of Hip Hop changes over time as different generations construct the narrative because that the positivity that the “80s babies” see as indicative of the culture is actually a result of efforts to curb the gang violence from the first decade of the “pioneers.” In *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip Hop* (2003), Ramsey claims that black cultural expressions must always be analyzed with respect to the social and historical context in which they were made to fully understand them. For the “80s babies,” their understanding of Hip Hop is shaped heavily by an era that embraced Afrocentrism and Pan-Africanism and the freedom experienced by blacks as a result of the end of legal segregation.

The “80s babies” recognize that these contexts shape their understanding of Hip Hop and it causes many of them to view their participation within the culture as a birthright. Steven, a web designer, clothing company CEO, and Bboy, spoke of Hip Hop as having a special connection to his generation:

I think it’s kind of hard in my era where I’m from not being somewhat a part of Hip Hop culture.

It is our culture. It’s us, our music, and our language, we created it so, it speaks what we relate

to. [For] people in my generation that grew up especially in urban communities, and big cities,

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<sup>57</sup> Afrocentrism is a term introduced by Scholar Molefi Asanti in the 1980s based on the concept that all Black people should shift their political and ideological beliefs to reflect African values and not the European ones imposed on blacks through slavery and colonization. In the late 1980s and through the 1990s the concept became popular in the United States as many African Americans began to embrace their connections to the continent of Africa with the wearing of African inspired clothing, the adoption of Swahili and African based cultural practices like the holiday Kwanzaa.

Hip Hop is just us. I can't relate to anything else the way I can relate to Hip Hop. I was born in the 80s and that's all I knew. There was some R&B and other stuff for older people to relate to but for people in my generation, its all Hip Hop.

Because Hip Hop was birthed out of urban blight, it is centrally located there. While not specifically the blight of New York City, young blacks growing up in disenfranchised urban neighborhoods all around the country connected with the culture because of similar conditions in urban slums nationwide. Because of Hip Hop's influence during the 1980s, Steven and other "80s babies" acknowledge that it was difficult for them not to be familiar with the culture because of how accurately it reflected there experiences. "80s babies" expressed a belief that for members of the preceding two generations, Hip Hop was a choice, something that they saw growing and wanted to take a part in shaping; whereas for themselves, they viewed Hip Hop as something that they were born into and inherited. Those that did not feel that they were born into it, the non-Black "80s babies," expressed that Hip Hop provided them with an identity because of how comfortable they felt being themselves within it and how they admired the creativity of and messages contained within the artforms. Explaining how he got introduced to Hip Hop, Scott continued:

I was in New York, the birthplace when I was 12 and I saw a street performance where a guy was hitting buckets with a stick while the other guy was rapping and then other people started coming and joining in and it eventually became a cipher<sup>58</sup>. I didn't even know it as a cipher back then but I was just fascinated by the creativity because it seemed so simple just a guy with his rhymes and

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<sup>58</sup> In Hip Hop, a cipher is a collection of emcees, who exchange freestyle rhymes either to a beat or a capella. Sometimes ciphers have topics that the emcees rhyme about, sometimes they turn into battles but they are generally used for exchange among members of the culture. Besides the emcees, there are generally other members who gather around to witness the cipher as bystanders.

a guy with sticks and a bucket but they were producing the most sophisticated stuff I had ever heard. When I got back home I immediately started seeking out the music and the culture and just dove in.

Speaking specifically about the messages in the music, Scott, along with other non-Black “80s babies,” expressed that their involvement in Hip Hop contributed to them raising their social consciousness, encouraging the ability to be accepting of people’s differences, as well as a desire to help fight injustices in the world. Speaking about how Hip Hop helped him develop his social awareness, Scott continued:

Ever since I started listening to it, it has influenced the way I view the world. One of the first albums I bought was Public Enemy<sup>59</sup> and it helped me become more aware of the continued oppression and racism in the US; “fight the power” and “can’t trust it” just stuck out in my memory. Before that I had a basic idea that whites and blacks were not totally equal, but Hip Hop definitely taught me a lot. On a scale of 1 to 10, I was a 1.5 before Hip Hop and it got me to at least an 8.5. And after that, I’ve become so much more aware of the inequality and the struggle because groups like Public Enemy introduced me to books like *From Benin to Baltimore* and *From Slavery to Freedom* and a lot of other ones. Listening to this music, and being part of this culture made it impossible for me to ignore the racism in society and not try to do something to change it.

In *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wangstas, Wannabes, Wiggers and the New Reality of Race in America* (2005), Kitwana shows how white members of Hip Hop culture are more likely than white non-members to be involved in social justice causes. With Scott, it was Hip Hop that pushed him to become involved in working to end social inequality but in Kitwana’s book, sometimes an initial interest in social justice issues leads non-

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<sup>59</sup> Public Enemy is a pioneering Hip Hop group whose lyrics focused on criticism of the racism within the United States government, legal system and media as well as focusing on ways to uplift Black people out of the desolate conditions in which they lived.

Black activists to Hip Hop culture, as is the case with Julie, a environmental justice activist and school teacher, who explained how being an activist led her to become a part of Hip Hop culture:

I hadn't really known too much about Hip Hop but I recognized that the majority of black members in our organization were deeply invested into it. I began listening to the lyrics of Mos Def Immortal Technique and the other Hip Hop artists that other members in my organization listened to and I loved it. They were speaking about social issues that I was familiar with and some I was unaware of. It was very resistant to the oppression and domination within our country and even in other areas of the world. When we had an event I met many people who called themselves "Hip Hop activists" and I began to see how this Hip Hop culture was one with very strong activism ties and I felt like I had found a place to belong; nobody questioned my motivations for being there to see if I was authentic just a white girl who had a thing for Black guys because they saw how serious I was about fighting injustice. Sometimes to the point where I even argued with them over some of the things I heard in the lyrics from some of my favorite artists.

Julie expresses how she saw Hip Hop as a place where her identity as an activist was accepted and where she found a community of other activists and those interested in eradicating inequality. Initially, because of what she had seen and heard about Hip Hop, Julie did not think that she would be interested in it but because there were constant intersections between her activism and Hip Hop culture, she became interested and ultimately fell in love with it. Although Julie became a member of Hip Hop culture, she admits that there are aspects of it that she does not totally agree with but expresses that she feels comfortable in expressing her concerns to other members. Another white "80s

baby,” Matt, unlike Julie and Scott, did feel that he was born into Hip Hop culture because of the environment where he grew up, claiming:

When I would hear emcees talk black pride stuff, like when Tupac said ‘I remember Marvin Gaye used to sing to me, he had me feelin like black was the thing to be’ No, I couldn’t relate to that, but the next line when he says ‘suddenly the ghetto didn’t seem that tough, ‘cause though we had it rough, we always had enough.’ That line I can relate to because I grew up in the hood. When Pac said he was livin in the projects, broke with no lights on, I was too. Me and my mom and my little sister. So when I hear rappers speak about the hood, I know that life, I know that struggle, even though I’m white. I might not be in my situation because of racism and things like some of my friends but at the end of the day, we’re neighbors in the same project, so the culture that reflects that mentality reflects me. I’ve gotten shit from people who try to say I act black, but I’m just a product of my environment. Just like a black kid who grew up in the suburbs would be talked about for acting white. But for me, it’s not an act, it’s how I am and it’s real to me.

Matt locates his Hip Hop identity within a Black urban landscape, supporting Nelson’s concept of Hip Hop “Ghettocentricity” and Forman’s discussion of the city as central to Hip Hop, both physically and symbolically, in terms of images, experiences, expressions and identities. Relating his environment to his Hip Hop identity, Matt claims a special connection to Hip Hop because it was birthed out of the environment with which he is familiar, even though the social context may be different. His view of Hip Hop as representative of social and economic struggles that may transcend race provide an understanding of how Hip Hop can have such appeal to different people worldwide and still claim to reflect the conditions of Black youth in the United States

For some of the “80s babies,” their attraction to Hip Hop is a rite of passage based on race and/or location, and for others it is based on an ideological connection

with the resistance and social critique of the culture, but for all of them, their membership in Hip Hop culture takes seriously the knowledge element and members continually asserted how much they learned about their history by ingesting the messages presented in the artforms and how much they learned about themselves through their participation in them. The “80s babies” had different things that drew them into Hip Hop culture, but they all insist that it has become a defining aspect of their identities. This common love for Hip Hop, though, does not mean that there are no conflicts among members, as Julie alluded to with her critique of some of the lyrics showing that, although there is a shared understanding about the most basic aspects of Hip Hop, the details can be manifested in infinite ways, some that seem to contradict. Sometimes the different viewpoints on Hip Hop culture result in conflict among members, but many of the “80s babies” assert that there is no absolute truth about Hip Hop, claiming it to be one of the things that makes it beautiful. Up until now, the “80s babies” have been generally in agreement about what Hip Hop is and what drew them into it, but when asked about what it meant to be a member of the culture, there were multiple conflicting views.

### 4.3 Levels of Participation

Although all of “80s babies” claimed to be part of Hip Hop culture, they held different views about what their membership entails and offered extensive commentary about how others manifest their claims to be members of Hip Hop. In *Bomb The Suburbs: Graffiti, Race, Freight-hopping and the Search for Hip-Hop’s Moral Center* (1993), Wimsatt uses the term “Hip Hop Head” to refer to those members of Hip Hop culture that study, participate, and believe in the intricacies of Hip Hop culture. The responses of the “80s babies,” however, revealed that, in addition to the groups commonly referred to as “Hip Hop Heads,” there are at least two factions that have different views on both Hip Hop culture and what it means to be a part of it. I have named those factions the “Hoppers” and the “Heads.” In addition to those factions, I will use the term “Snobs” to refer to those who claim to be “Hip Hop Heads” because the “80s babies” who did not self identify as “Hip Hop Heads” accused those who did of having elitist views about Hip Hop culture with which they did not want to be associated. Through self-identification, the “Hip Hop Heads” have attempted to establish themselves as the most authentic members of Hip Hop culture creating in-group/out-group dynamics within the “80s babies” cohort. The “Snobs” have placed themselves in a status position above other members of Hip Hop culture and the culture’s enthusiasts, and have taken it upon themselves to uphold the integrity and authenticity of Hip Hop, as they perceive it. As a result, many of the “80s babies” reject the term “Hip Hop Head” and have begun referring to themselves as simply “Heads”

forming their own in-groups<sup>60</sup>, positioning themselves in contrast to the “Snobs” and of more authentic status within Hip Hop culture because they are more tolerant and embracing of the many interpretations of Hip Hop. They have taken on the responsibility to present an alternative to the “Snob” perspective within the culture. The “Hoppers” comprise the remainder of the “80s babies” and do not claim a certain status position within the culture or accept any specific roles that are necessary for their participation in Hip Hop. They recognize that Hip Hop will always mean different things to different people and that nobody’s personal preferences should be held as an authority when assessing Hip Hop. Generally, these “Hoppers” are not involved in the conflict between the “Snobs” and the “Heads” and feel that their only obligation is to make sure that they continue to act according to the lessons that they claim to have learned from Hip Hop.

Travis, a college student and aspiring emcee, who I classify as a “Hopper,” explains why he is part of Hip Hop culture but not a Hip Hop Head, saying:

A “Hip Hop Head”? No, but a member of Hip Hop culture, Yes. To me the term “Hip Hop Head” means a Hip Hop historian or an expert, I’m not that. I’m a member of the culture by default. Hip Hop came out of the ghetto and poverty, so did I, so I connect with it. Hip Hop is an expression to me...making something out of nothing. Taking the project wall that was meant to keep us in and tagging it, turning it into art. Everything I do, I try to just embody the principles of it. Of course I know about it because you should always know about your culture, but I’m not at the level where I can sit around and debate it all day like some people can and honestly I don’t want to because I’d rather live it than talk about it.

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<sup>60</sup> In social psychology an in-group is defined as a group toward which individuals feel loyalty and respect due to membership in the group.



Here, Travis expresses the belief that there is a certain amount of knowledge necessary that one must possess to be considered a “Hip Hop Head,” but also that those who have that knowledge are not the only members of the culture. Travis also expressed no desire to be a “Hip Hop Head,” claiming that they spend more time theorizing about Hip Hop than participating in it. He does, however, take seriously his loyalty to Hip Hop culture and manifests its ideals in his actions. Like Travis, many of the “80s babies” reject the term “Hip Hop Head,” claiming that there is something unattractive about the academic approach that they take to the culture.

The “80s babies” who did identify themselves as “Hip Hop Heads” supported Travis’s belief that it takes some amount of knowledge about Hip Hop’s history and a certain level of commitment to its elements to be a “Hip Hop Head.” Carlos, a chef and boxer, said:

I’m a “Hip Hop Head,” absolutely. What makes me one is my encyclopedic knowledge of artists and lyrics. I know years and months of famous speeches and concerts, and I go to shows regularly. I just pay attention. I’m old school though, ‘cause Hip Hop died in 99. It used to be about the streets, beats, hard lyrics and attitude, a unique attitude. Now, everybody is the same. No one kicks a positive rhyme in the mainstream and positive cats are unheard of. I will say you have people like Nas or Lupe Fiasco that’s putting out good music but the majority of what’s getting played is this senseless repetitive music that doesn’t pass the bar set by the music made in the 90s.

Here Carlos not only claims that he is a “Hip Hop Head” because of his knowledge about the culture, but also because of his affinity to a certain era when he felt that Hip Hop was more authentic and his rejection of the current representation of Hip Hop.

When Sharon, a paralegal and CEO of an event planning company, discussed what made her a “Hip Hop Head,” she echoed Carlos’ sentiments and said:

As “Hip Hop Heads, we know good music, and we know what’s trash. We have extremely superior music tastes [as compared] to average people. For us to call something Hip Hop, it has to be good, no great, mindblowing even. There is no room for wackness in Hip Hop and we pity and make fun of the people who think that this new stuff is Hip Hop.

The views of both Carlos and Sharon, who self identify as “Hip Hop Heads,” show the elitism of which the other “80s babies” accuse them and justifies their designation as “Snobs” in my research.

“Snobs” claim to have a superior understanding of Hip Hop in comparison to both members of the culture and casual listeners. They see it as their responsibility to continue to remind others what Hip Hop should be, according to the standards they have set for it based on the music of the “Golden Era.” Though they have no definite time when the “Golden Era” begins and ends, the general consensus among the “80s babies” is that it lasted from the late 1980s, extended through the mid 1990s, and ended with the rise of the “Jiggy Era” in the late 1990s. Within Hip Hop culture, the “Jiggy Era” is marked by songs and videos celebrating conspicuous consumption. “Jiggy Era” lyrics focused on making millions of dollars, mostly through the illegal means of drug trafficking, as celebrated in the “gangster rap” era that preceded the “Jiggy Era,” and then spending those millions on cars, jewelry, houses, clothes, women and other luxury items. Describing what made the “Golden Era” so special to the “80s Babies,” Donald said:

When I speak of the golden era I mean a time when every album seemed to be groundbreaking. Every album was earth shattering; of course there were banging beats, but it seemed like every mc was saying something that made your head spin on every other song. There was no such thing as filler material. Every joint was packed to the top, with nothing but that good stuff. If Hip Hop represents us, the golden era represents the best of us.

The richness that the “80s babies” attribute to the “Golden Era” is characterized by its music but extends to the other elements of the culture, as well. It is responsible for establishing the Hip Hop identity that the “80s babies” have developed through the introduction and adoption of specific clothing styles, language, food and dances, as well as stances on social issues and approaches to relationships.

Recently, scholars have begun to write about Hip Hop’s supposed Golden Era, but like the “80s babies,” their designation of it differs in concept or time. In the recently formed Hip Hop academic Journal, *Words, Beats, Life*, it has been defined as existing from 1986-1995, but other sources use the years 1988-1993. Despite the differences in the exact years they consider to comprise it, all “80s babies” acknowledge the “Golden Era.” The difference between the “Snobs” and the other members of Hip Hop culture is their rejection of anything that was done after that era and a feeling of superiority over others because of their extensive knowledge of Hip Hop culture. The “Snobs”’ loyalty to the “Golden Era” is an example of the romanticism and mythology surrounding Hip Hop’s history that helps justify Hip Hop as a culture according to the Black Arts Movement’s seven criteria for culture, because the “Snobs” claim, as Donald did, that all of the music was good. Realistically though, it is more accurate that they only remember the good music because it is still relevant more than 10 years after it was

recorded. Besides the music of the “Golden Era,” the “80s babies” have a collective memory full of images that represent the manifestation of the other elements during the era: mixtape cassettes, colorful urban clothing brands like Karl Kani, Girbaud and Cross Colours, as well as the urbanization of designer labels like Ralph Lauren and Nautica, boomboxes, Adidas and Nike sneakers, slang words like “fresh” and “dope,” dances like the Roger Rabbit and the Wop, hi-top fades, gold medallions. These and other objects were mentioned by the “80s babies” when discussing the “Golden Era” and have thus become representative of it. To show their connection with this era, many “80s babies” have attempted to preserve some of these symbols to increase solidarity with those who have the same respect for Hip Hop that they do. The obsession with “Golden Era” symbols has also begun to be visible among the “millenniums” who have embraced the symbols of the “Golden Era” without the knowledge of their meaning. This is the foundation of the critique of the “Millenniums” from those within the culture who view knowledge of Hip Hop as a necessary component of membership.

Many of the “80s babies” shared the knowledge of and commitment to Hip Hop that the “snobs” have, but refer to themselves as “Heads” in an effort to distance themselves from the self proclaimed “Hip Hop Heads.” Describing the difference between the two groups, Benjamin, a music producer, said:

I’d call myself a “Head”, not a “Hip Hop Head.” “Hip Hop Heads” are too closed-minded. When someone says they’re a “Hip Hop Head,” they judge songs on a personal bias like, that Lil Wayne song is wack, he has no talent, he’s ruining Hip Hop. Bring back Slick Rick! A Head, will listen to anything, If a Lil Wayne song is hot, I fucks with it and if a Garth Brooks song is hot I fucks with that too. “Hip Hop Heads” tend to deny hot music because of some higher

“principle” of Hip Hop. The whole thing is ironic because if we had started off closed minded, there would’ve never been Hip Hop to begin with.

Benjamin’s indictment of those who claim to be “Hip Hop Heads” is that they have forgotten that Hip Hop was built on a respect of and appreciation for people’s differences and creativity and instead, only hold their favorite aspects of Hip Hop as most authentic. He also asserts that “Heads” love for Hip Hop does not prevent them from appreciating other genres of music and many of the nuances of Hip Hop culture. Showing how “Heads” have the knowledge of “Snobs” but without the elitist views, Donte, a college professor and musician, said:

I’m a “Head.” I have a strong alliance to Hip Hop but that’s not where it stops. Being a [Head] means going above and beyond just a casual listener. You don’t just know Black Moons “Who Got Da Props” you also know what that song meant to Hip Hop. You know how important D&D studios was in making that record happen. You probably even know the record they sampled to make the song, Ronnie Laws Tidal Waves. As a result, you have a closeness to the music that the casual listeners don’t have, it’s more personal. You’ve invested yourself beyond the notes being played. It’s not just knowing it, but it’s also internalizing the knowledge. It’s education not memorization. But at the same time, you can’t claim to be a “Head” if you do just listen to Hip Hop because Hip Hop has so many influences. If you only listen to Hip Hop, you can never really know about Hip Hop because the samples come from all different genres, the dance moves come from all different genres, the content in the rhyme touches on all kinds of experiences.

Both Benjamin and Donte assert that being a “Head” means being open to all genres of music and artforms, thus using Hip Hop more as a perspective from which to enjoy them, instead of a measuring stick to judge the quality of art.

Although there is conflict between the “Heads” and “Snobs,” they agree that the ability to disagree but still come together and celebrate and participate in the culture is one thing that makes Hip Hop so beautiful. In his research about inter-group conflict, Sherif showed in his Robber’s Cave experiment that groups in conflict, when given a common goal which requires cooperation by both groups to be attained, exhibit a decreased level of conflict between the groups (Sherif 1953). For the “80s babies,” the conflicts are organized around small issues of preference and are often minimized by members’ shared love and appreciation for Hip Hop and overall desire to preserve and progress the culture, so although there are some smaller in-group/out-group dynamics, they have a greater cultural solidarity as members of Hip Hop culture than to their smaller in-groups. Speaking on the continuous debates within the culture, Sharon says:

We argue about everything, the best part about Hip Hop is the debates because they get so serious but at the end of the day we can all find some point where we agree on and we forget what we were arguing about. Because at the end of the day, there are some things about this culture that are bigger than our opinions on if Lil Wayne is or is not the best rapper alive.

For Sharon, the debates that occur within Hip Hop are a necessary part of the culture that she enjoys. She does not discuss any resolutions that come from the debates but asserts that ultimately, they are small issues that do not interfere with the building that takes place within the culture. A major difference between the “Snobs” and the other “80s babies” is how they view Hip Hop debates. While “Snobs” like Sharon enjoy the debates, “Heads” and “Hoppers” are more likely to bypass the debates, as Travis alluded to earlier and as Carmen, an elementary school teacher, explains:

One of the main reasons I hesitate to call myself a “Hip Hop Head” is because a lot of those people like to get into these useless debates just to try to one up you or show that they know more about Hip Hop than you. They rarely entertain any perspective that is different than theirs. If you like Young Jeezy or Snoop or any artists that’s not in that small conscious box, they try to question your love of Hip Hop. I love the dialog in Hip Hop because it gives us an opportunity to learn from each other, but these Hip Hop heads, they just argue on some dumb shit and nothing gets accomplished in the end.

Though she does not like the debates, Carmen admits that she views the dialogue about Hip Hop culture as a positive aspect. Between the three groups within the “80s babies,” there are small inter-group cognitive conflicts about the different viewpoints, ideas and opinions about Hip Hop, but according to the “80s babies,” they are not presented as being so great that they hinder their participation in the culture. They can always agree on the larger issues as reminders that they are ultimately members of the same culture. Whether the “80s babies” refer to it as debate or dialogue tough, the biggest topic of conversation within Hip Hop culture is its liveliness. Of the “80s Babies,” the “Snobs” were the only members who made claims of Hip Hop being dead, but all other “80s babies” agreed that, to continue with the analogy, Hip Hop is not in the best health.

#### 4.4 Current State of Hip Hop

Though recently the severity of concerns over Hip Hop's vitality have intensified, this is not the first time within the culture that the members have expressed concerns. It was first proclaimed dead in 1979 when the Sugar Hill Gang released the first rap record on a major label<sup>61</sup> and again in 1986 when the Beastie Boys, a white rap trio, had the first rap album to reach the top spot on Billboard music charts.<sup>62</sup> Now the "Snobs" among the "80s babies" and others within the culture claim that Hip Hop died in the late 1990s with the rise of the "Jiggy Era." In reality though, the claim of Hip Hop being deceased is often not to be taken literally but rather as a metaphor for a climate within the culture where members feel a disconnect between the current representations of Hip Hop and those that they fell in love with. As many times as people have claimed it to be dead, they have also acknowledged its ability to resurrect itself. Though the "Snobs" have decided to reject the current state of Hip Hop because it is different from the "Golden Era," the "Hoppers" and the "Heads" accept and even embrace the new manifestations of Hip Hop. Answering the question of whether Hip Hop is dead or not, Donald said:

It's not dead because you have cats who are out there making the music reminiscent of that golden era and they're still getting plenty of love for it. Hip Hop as we know it in our generation is far as Pete Rock and CL Smooth, Gangstarr and that serious sound, that era is dead and it's never going to return. Maybe in that sense Hip Hop in its original or purest form has died, but if so it's only made way for a new sound, a new feel, a new vibe. Hip Hop is all about creating new

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<sup>61</sup> Many pioneers felt that the death of Hip Hop began when artists began relationships with large record labels and ceased to distribute music themselves

<sup>62</sup> The mainstream success of the Beastie Boys that eclipsed the success of Black artists signified to many the cooptation and death of Hip Hop.



vibes, taking pieces of the old stuff and making new stuff with it, sometime so new that the people outside of the culture won't even be able to make the connections. But that's great because it's the new sound and feel that's going to stand the test of time for this new generation.

For Donald and many other "80s babies," the question is not whether Hip Hop is dead, but rather if its new direction will affect the "Millenniums" and future generations in a positive or negative way.

Because of his admittance of Hip Hop's necessity to change and his acceptance and embrace of that reality, I consider Donald to be a "Head" but his use of the "Golden Era" as the standard by which he measures all Hip Hop shows that he also has "Snob" sympathies. When asked how Donald viewed himself, he agreed, saying that he understands both sides of the arguments about what is and is not Hip Hop and respects everyone's opinion; he feels strongly about his own preferences, but tries not to impose them on other members of the culture. Even though Donald admits that the "millenniums" Hip Hop will be different from his generation's he still holds the "Golden Era" as his personal model for what all artists should aspire to and how the rest of the culture's members should participate in the culture.

Like their views on what it means to be a member of Hip Hop culture, the "80s babies" varied in how they viewed the importance of standards, what the standards are, what they should be, and if they're being lived up to by the "millenniums" who participate in the culture. When discussing the current state of Hip Hop, Sharon faults what she views as a failure to meet quality standards within Hip Hop the introduction of profits being made from the culture by artists catering to limited representations, and corporate executives exploiting the public's fascination with stereotypical images of

Blacks. Comparing her memory of Hip Hop with the current state of the culture, she laments:

I grew up on Hip Hop. I was an infant when it was an infant, so as an adult, to see what it has become is saddening. Its like coming back to the neighborhood you remember being so full of life when you were a kid, and seeing that now there are abandoned buildings, trash and junkies everywhere...The standards are gone now and it's all about money. You can't tell me that Soulja boy's demo wouldn't have gotten thrown out in 1996.

A proud “Snob,” Sharon claims that one of the “millenniums” most popular artists, Soulja Boy, who gained fame by making catchy dance rap music, would have never been as popular in the “Golden Era,” when the focus was more on the message and the lyrics. Sharon’s view of Hip Hop represents the romanticism that many “Snobs” have when they speak on Hip Hop where they only recognize the positive elements of “Golden Era.” Those like Sharon, who talk against the rise in popularity of dance music among the “millenniums,” ignore the popularity of party music that existed in all of Hip Hop’s previous generations. MC Hammer, who is often cited as the first rap artist to use the popularity of dance music to cross over to a mainstream audience, achieved his popularity during the “Golden Era.” Clearly, very popular dance and party music existed during the “Golden Era,” as well. In addition to the large amount of good dance music made during the “Golden Era,” there was also plenty of subpar conscious/political music produced. Over time, though, it has faded from the “80s babies” cultural memory, so the only remaining influences from the era are those that the members hold as the best aspects of it and those that fit the narrative that has been constructed of the “Golden Era.” In his 1996 article about narrative construction with transsexuals, Mason-Schrock

describes the practice of omitting aspects of reality that are inconsistent with the constructed narrative as tactful blindness. This tactic is being employed as scholars begin to write and older members tell younger ones about the “Golden Era,” painting it as a time when everything about Hip Hop was positive by using a quality standard to determine what made the “Golden Era” so great. As with other issues about Hip Hop, there are different manifestations of Hip Hop standards other than quality. Further elaborating on the standards within Hip Hop and discussing what they are, focusing specifically on the music, Donald explains:

To me Hip Hop is about the content [of the lyrics] and the beat because whether its good or bad the beat can move people, so something can be bad and still be Hip Hop. Some of my favorite artists have made, what I consider to be bad music, but when I talk to other people, they might like those songs I think are bad. In its most basic form, it’s about the beats and rhymes. Cappadona is wack to me, but he’s Hip Hop because he’s sincere about it. He’s just not as good as others. But at the same time I know people who put Cap as one of their favorite emcees, so again it’s all really a judgment call that we all have to make and stand by but you have to have some standard, and you have to make sure that you can defend it.

Unlike Sharon, who refused to call anything Hip Hop that she does not view as mindblowing, Donald claims that Hip Hop can be good and bad because some people are more skilled than others, so for him, the standard is not in the quality of the music but the intent of the artists and other members to sincerely uphold the essence of the culture. This essence goes back to the five elements and the principles of the Zulu Nation and the Temple of Hip Hop that the “80s babies” acknowledge as indicative of the culture’s foundation. Donald expresses that there is no definitive way to uphold the standards because people perceive them differently, but that there is a necessity for

members to have and uphold some, whatever they may be. Sharing Donald's views on how standards are subjective, Benjamin proclaimed:

To me there is no quality standard but there is a realness standard. You have to live Hip Hop. Whether it's a negative or a positive form doesn't matter because that's all a matter of opinion really. There are some artists that I hate, but they are Hip Hop. Just like with anything else, some people are more talented than others, but just because somebody may not be as good, doesn't mean they're not being sincere to the culture because there are some good artists like Justin Timberlake or Nelly Furtado who have some Hip Hop influences, but they're not and will never be Hip Hop. But even though I don't particularly care for Soulja Boy, I have to acknowledge him as Hip Hop, just like Kid-N-Play and Kwame and MC Hammer.

Benjamin shows how complicated the understanding of "realness" within Hip Hop can be by acknowledging that there are some artists and aspects within Hip Hop that he does not like but he cannot dismiss them because they are validated by other members. Whereas Sharon and other "Snobs" rejects Soulja Boy as part of Hip Hop culture because he does not uphold their quality standard, "Heads" like Benjamin and Carmen accept him as a part of the culture because other members do, Soulja Boy may represent aspects of the culture that some of the "80s babies" do not necessarily like but the "Heads" and "Hoppers" still acknowledge him because the aspects he represents are as valid as those with which they connect. In some ways, the "Heads" recognize aspects of Soulja Boy and other critiqued artists that uphold their understanding of Hip Hop, as Carmen admits:

As much as I hate to say this around certain people, that lil nigga Soulja Boy is so Hip Hop. The freedom of expression in "Yaaaah Trick Yaaaah" is the culture in a nutshell; because he's just saying how he feels and expressing his frustration. We also have to remember that Hip Hop used

to be centered around the party. He gets the party goin the same way that Doug E Fresh used to. Dancing, partying, having fun, that's just as much resistance as Fight The Power because we need to have some kinda release from working hard and fighting racism and shit every day. That release, that opportunity to just wild out, that's so Hip Hop.

Here, Carmen places Soulja Boy in the lineage of party music from Hip Hop culture's beginnings and claims that it is as necessary a part of the culture as the conscious/political aspects. The debate among the "80s babies" concerning the acceptance of the "millenniums'" manifestations of Hip Hop shows how objects within culture do not always have the same meaning, and has resulted in the three factions within the group. When it comes to Soulja Boy, who is seen as the representative of the "millenniums'" understanding of Hip Hop, the "Snobs" view it as counterproductive because it perpetuates stereotypes of young black as being ignorant, materialistic and silly, while the "Heads" see it as a return to Hip Hop's original purpose as party music and as subversive resistance. Whereas "Heads" and "Snobs" seem to have concrete and polarized views about how to treat the "millenniums'" manifestation of Hip Hop culture--the "Snobs" rejecting it and the "Heads" embracing it--the "Hoppers" responses complicate the issue.

Discussing the balance between paying homage to the past and progressing and creating new aspects, Steven explained:

The thing about Hip Hop is that you have different types and styles and different eras with different influences that are characterized by certain things so there are no real definitions, they're more like starting points...Hip Hop has to evolve for people to stay interested in it, if it doesn't then what's the point? You can't say which way you want it to evolve because nobody owns it...I got into Hip Hop and breakin' because there were no rigid rules so you can't have it both

ways. You can't want rules and then want to do whatever the hell you want... You can have what Hip Hop is in this era and identify with it but you can't be the authority on what anyone else is doing in terms of if it's real or authentic because Hip Hop has a standard but it's subjective so if in another person's mind, they're upholding the standard then its like nigga shut the hell up with the criticism because you don't own Hip Hop.

Here, Steven discusses the need for Hip Hop to continue to change and also some frustration with those who complain about the way the culture is changing. His claim that nobody "owns" Hip Hop also runs contrary to those who view it as something that belongs to them and therefore should always fit their criteria. For Steven, all he or any other member can do is participate in the culture the way they feel is most authentic and respect others who claim to do the same. He vehemently expresses frustration with the closed-minded members of the culture for their refusal to accept creativity that is not representative of their specific preferences. Steven's views are characteristic of the frustration that many of the "Hoppers" have with the "Snobs" and those outside of the culture with narrow views concerning what Hip Hop is and should be. Elaborating on how detrimental to the progression of Hip Hop the elitist view is, Benjamin said:

These so called Hip Hop heads act like they are the authority on Hip Hop by saying what's real Hip Hop and what's not but they're so closed-minded and they forget that if the pioneers thought the way they do, there wouldn't have ever been a Hip Hop to begin with. If we were closed-minded, who the hell would have ever thought to make beats by chopping up old records or how to take a scratched record and make it art? I hate when I hear people say Hip Hop is dead... Just because Hip Hop is out of the limelight doesn't mean that its dead. The only way it would die is if aliens came down here and killed the entire human race because as we know it, Hip Hop is a reflection of society. When we change, the music will change.

Many of the “80s babies” discussed the current problems within the culture, like materialism, misogyny and the glorification of violence and culture, in terms of Hip Hop imitating life, like Benjamin does. They acknowledged the problems and insisted that any problems within Hip Hop culture connect to the issues with their communities and United States society.

Borrowing from emcee Mos Def to make the connection, Michael expressed:

Mos Def said it on Black on Both Sides when he was asked where do you think Hip Hop will be in 10 years. He said the people are Hip Hop so the form is gonna be a reflection of the circumstances of the people. Unfortunately right now because I would say that Emceeing as an artform is done. I think Hip Hop that crosses over is like all other music that crosses over because corporations hop on trends to sell music and other products so right now we're selling obsessions and not music. People buy Hip Hop, and I'm talking about white people because they buy Hip Hop albums, but they are doing it to be voyeurs. Hip Hop is reflecting us, but it shows what a horrible situation we are in. So to improve Hip Hop would mean that we are improving ourselves, but the beauty about Hip Hop is that you can use it to look honestly at where we are, but nobody's looking and seeing themselves.

Michael asserts that the negativity within Hip Hop is a reflection of the negativity within the Black community among the youth, but also indicts white consumers for purchasing Hip Hop's product without any critical analysis or serious critique of the larger social conditions that result in the materialism, violence, and hedonism reflected in the representations of Hip Hop culture that they love to experience from a safe distance. Writers on Hip Hop, like Nelson George and Robin D.G. Kelley, have cautioned about the impact of white consumerism of Hip Hop, claiming that the majority of white consumers think that products like music and fashion give them a slice of authentic

blackness, which they often relate to urban poverty and violence. These scholars claim that, because of the preexisting stereotypes many of these whites hold, they cannot see the critiques of the injustice within our society's institutions presented in the culture's artforms, but rather use it to reify the negative stereotypes of young blacks that they already hold. Michael views Hip Hop as society's best tool for self-reflection, but express doubt that people are using it for that purpose. Agreeing with Michael that Hip Hop is a reflection of the state of their communities, Aaron, a freelance sportswriter, discussed why the current reflection is so negative.

Honestly, when I look at the Hip Hop that these younger kids are making, as much as we talk shit about how bad it is, it's accurate. The portrayal of these young black dudes with no guidance or direction. No respect for anything but money, spending it frivolously for stuff to impress girls and their friends. Yeah, it might be negative, but I live in the hood and I see that in the majority of these young guys. Of course this isn't the only way that the kids are, but let's not act like the representations are inaccurate. Maybe overexaggerated and unbalanced but for a lot of kids, this is their reality.

Here, Aaron admits that even the negative representations of Hip Hop culture are accurate and reflect what he considers to be the values of the "millenniums" of Hip Hop culture. He raises the issue about the balance, or lack thereof, between negative and positive representations that many "80s babies" raise, but does not completely dismiss the negative ones, recognizing them as unfortunately accurate. Continuing to contrast the views of members of Hip Hop culture from the different generations, Aaron observed:

We are in a special position and I think that it causes us to have a superiority complex when looking at these younger kids because we were raised when Hip Hop was really making its mark.



We are the only generation who inherited this Hip Hop and saw it rise from being something local to something global that everybody respected. But we forget that when we were younger, the old generation was saying that we were killing Hip Hop, now we're saying the same thing. So we have to be careful not to commit the same sins they did. Or maybe we're supposed to and that's how the culture will continue to progress because everybody has to pay dues and prove themselves worthy of the previous generation's respect and acceptance into the culture.

Here Aaron acknowledges the intergenerational conflict within Hip Hop, citing the connection with Hip Hop's development that the "80s babies" have that is lacking for the "millenniums," while introducing the possibility that the admonishment from older generations might all be part of a Hip Hop rite of passage process that helps the culture progress.

Within Hip Hop culture, many feel that it is important for younger members of the culture to respect and acknowledge their predecessors and get their approval to participate. With the rise of the popularity of Hip Hop and the visibility gained through the internet, the "millenniums" do not have to validate themselves to the older members of the culture because they have outlets available that allow them to produce what they feel represents Hip Hop on their own.

Though the “Snobs” continually rejected any manifestation of Hip Hop that was unfamiliar to them, many of the “Hoppers” and “Heads” accepted that Hip Hop as a culture goes through periods of ups and downs but remained confident that eventually things would improve as they have in the past. Discussing the different eras that categorize the culture’s high and low periods, Roger explained:

We have to remember that Hip Hop all started as party music. We have to remember that in the beginning of Hip Hop, the music didn’t even have words, it was just in the background to set the mood. Then the emcees started taking center stage and we had the gangster stuff become popular because it was speaking to the conditions that we were the most familiar with at the time. After that we had the political era take control because after seeing the problems in discussed in because of the gangster music, the movement started to focus on changing things for the better. Then we started seeing change so we started relaxing and had the party element. Although it’s not as serious as the other eras the party and bullshit element grabs people because it’s universally relatable, everybody parties. The problem is that recently, the political era just continues to be skipped and it’s going back and forth from party to gangsta.

Like Roger, many of the “80s babies” echoed concerns about how the political/conscious aspect of Hip Hop continues to be neglected as time progresses. It is important to note that the dominance of one persona within Hip Hop as more visible than others does not mean that the others do not exist. Some of the most political/conscious music was made during the “Jiggy Era”<sup>63</sup> and some of the most acclaimed gangster rap albums were made during the “Golden Era”<sup>64</sup>. When the “80s babies” discussed the reasons that the political/conscious era continues to be skipped, they often expressed that that was due in part to the dynamics of Hip Hop’s relationship with the mainstream. For the “80s babies,” whether they felt that Hip Hop is dead or viewed as alive and well, they all point to the mainstream as a force that changed Hip Hop in ways that make it impossible to be what it initially was, music by and for blacks, by taking it from a local to a global phenomenon.

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<sup>63</sup> Artists Mos Def and Talib Kweli released the *Blackstar* album in 1998 as an underground manifesto that critiqued the Jiggy Era and predicted its end.

<sup>64</sup> In 1992, Dr Dre released the *The Chronic*, a year later Snoop Dogg released his debut album *Doggystyle*. Both albums have been heralded as two of the best West Coast gangster rap albums of all time.

#### 4.5 Hip Hop and the Mainstream

The general consensus within Hip Hop culture is that the relationship between Hip Hop culture and the mainstream is responsible for the discussion of Hip Hop being dead because of the involvement of major corporations and their efforts to exploit Hip Hop. The “80s babies,” however, expressed a wide variety of views about both the positive and negative aspects of Hip Hop becoming one of the most popular influences on pop culture, as well as about the more complicated aspects of the relationship. Though there were varying views about how to regard the influence of the mainstream on Hip Hop culture, there was a consensus from the “80s babies” that the mainstream representations are seriously unbalanced. Elaborating on the lack of balance in the way Hip Hop is represented in the mainstream, Frank, a retail employee, asserted:

[Mainstream representation of Hip Hop] don't do justice to all aspects...There's so many areas of Hip Hop that mainstream is just a small part and the majority of it has a negative representation...The negative perceptions that the outside world has on our culture is brought up by the mainstream representation of Hip Hop. The misogyny, violence, drug usage and drug sales, that's all that you see in the mainstream when they show Hip Hop. Sure it exists, but it's more than that.

Echoing Frank's sentiment, Aaron, who previously stated that the negative representations of young Black men in Hip Hop culture found in the mainstream are accurate, also asserted that the lack of balance takes things out of their proper context and clarified:

Like I said, it's accurate, because as a young black man, I still see some of myself in those images but that's not all that I am. The media doesn't show how diverse we are. The scholar, the hustler, the overconfident, the meek, we are all of that but if you go by what you see on TV and

hear on the radio you wouldn't know because you only see the materialism and misogyny and violence. And it starts with misrepresenting these artists, who are supposed to be the voice of the culture. Look at Rich Boy who blew up with Throw Some D's, that was a catchy song so the mainstream loved it, but if you listen to his album, its good southern Hip Hop, not the crossover catchy stuff, but unless you buy the album, you'd never hear his songs that really connect with people.

Both Frank and Aaron expressed that the images of Hip Hop presented in the mainstream should not be dismissed by those within the culture because they are accurate, but that there should be a critique of the lack of balance. The majority of the "80s babies" acknowledged the reality of negative images and expressed that they have a potentially positive impact because they provide a social criticism and remind them of the cultural problems that must be addressed. Speaking in-depth about Hip Hop as a reflection of society and about the social criticism that it provides, Benjamin says:

There's an element of truthfulness about Hip Hop. We don't hide the truth as much as other people; like the fact that the government is fucking up or the fact that gun violence among the youths is out of control; we don't hide the negatives about other people or ourselves. Look at how battling goes, emcees air out each others dirty laundry. What people don't see though is the outcome of that. When the battle is over, most times, guy shake hands and then go back to the lab and work on the deficiencies that were pointed out so they get better. That's what we're supposed to do as a society; listen to hear the problems and then try to fix them. The public though, only see the negative images. They don't see the critique and work to improve the conditions.

Frank, Aaron, Benjamin and other "80s babies" acknowledge that there is something positive to be taken from even the negative representations of Hip Hop if they are looked at critically. However, they continually express that the lack of balance makes the

mainstream images bad for the culture because they only present negative representations to the public while omitting the positive ones.

Without being able to understand the larger picture, the public takes the snippets given to them and develops negative conclusions about not only Hip Hop but the people participating in the culture, resulting in the perpetuation of stereotypes of young minorities. The “80s babies” repeatedly contrasted how current mainstream representations differ from the limited media representations that existed during the “Golden Era,” claiming that even though there were less representations during the “Golden Era” they were more diverse than the many similar ones that dominate the current mainstream. Expressing nostalgia for the balance that he remembers in the television representations of Hip Hop when he first embraced the culture, Scott expresses a difference between then and now, saying:

It would be hard for me to say that the listeners of Hip Hop today get the same thing from it as I did. The Old Yo MTV Raps episodes I have would feature everything. KRS followed by Bobbie Brown Posse, Humpty, then Public Enemy, Snoop, Rakim, Ice Cube and Tupac, etc. was all balanced. Nowadays most “conscious” Hip Hop is delivered by the same people who’ve always done it in the mainstream. Not saying that other artists don’t exist but nobody hears them. For every one Lupe Fiasco or any other intelligent artist, they saturate the listeners with 10 Soulja boy type artists so there’s no balance anymore.

For Scott, it is the balance that is indicative of the “Golden Era,” not any certain quality of music. Whether it was good or bad, Scott claims the “Golden Era” as golden because all the personas from political/conscious to gangsta rappers in both the mainstream and the underground were represented. Unlike the snob views of Donald and Sharon’s that

present the “Golden Era” as a time when there was only good music, Scott and other “Heads” remember it as a time when there was more balance, so for them, the standards concern integrity more than quality. Agreeing with Scott’s assessment of the lack of balance, many “80s babies” expressed that the imbalance within mainstream representations of Hip Hop is skewed towards the party and gangster personas and the political/conscious ones are not given equal representation. In offering an explanation, Roger claims:

[Record] labels weren’t interested in signing political artists because you can promote more stuff with party music. The only thing that the political hip hop pushed was movement and progress but party stuff might push sneakers, or a drink or clothes which is cool. But it’s all braggadocio. With the political stuff it’s hard to sell stuff because you can’t sell a movement, you move in a movement.

Roger reveals that corporations have different goals for Hip Hop than members of the culture; corporations are motivated by the opportunity to use Hip Hop’s influence to market products and the members of the culture are motivated by the purpose of the culture to move people. Donte uses a detailed relationship metaphor, further describing the dynamics between the mainstream industry and Hip Hop culture, noting:

The culture and the mainstream industry are 2 separate things but they’re a married couple. The business cares about numbers, the culture attaches the human concern and relatability to those numbers, kind of like the difference between a one person in the marriage wanting sex and the other one wanting love so it’s an unequal partnership. The mainstream wants sex, the culture is cool with sex but the culture loves you more. The inequality comes because there is a strength in numbers when it comes to Hip Hop. More people want to fuck Hip Hop than really want to love it, and when I say fuck I mean exploit. And then on the other side, there are a lot of people who

claim to love Hip Hop but they're just in love with the idea of loving Hip Hop because of what they have been shown that loving Hip Hop is, often times by the same mainstream that's exploiting it.

Donte speaks not only of different motivations for the members of culture and the agents of the mainstream, but also claims that it is the mainstream that has the majority of the power in the relationship between the two because of its influence on the general public. He also discusses how the mainstream influences how members of Hip Hop begin to view their own culture, based on representations in the mainstream. Further describing the inequality in the relationship that Donte presents, Charles said:

The mainstream is very watered down and very safe. Edgy acts never make it big despite their brilliance; look at Dead Prez and Talib. Those that don't sacrifice their artistic integrity, sacrifice their pockets. Mainstream lets profitability dictate everything, which always will be a problem. And now that records aren't selling, the backend is suffering more. They don't consider that maybe records aren't selling because they're not good or because what worked once is not a new formula that every album should follow to gain similar success. So what happens is development time is cut, projects are rushed to make more money, but artistry suffers. So just look at it as a big wound that won't stop bleeding. Nobody cares about the artistry because the checkbooks will always have the pull, and when the mainstream believes that gimmicks and dances are more profitable than lyrics with substance, we will continue with this trend.

Donte and Charles both acknowledge that the mainstream's primary goal is making money and that it conflicts with the primary goals of Hip Hop--of cultural expression through art to empower Blacks to resist oppression and build solidarity within their separate communities. The "80s babies" all agreed that Hip Hop is Black culture, though not solely Black in terms of participation and influences, but definitely in its



foundation. With that premise, some “80s babies” recognized that the exploitive relationship Hip Hop has with the mainstream is similar to other forms of Black music.

Reluctantly, Sharon asserted:

I hate to say this but Hip Hop was all our own until white people got a hold of it, just like jazz. Jazz used to be Louie and Ella and Count Basie, Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington, now it's a damn sax instead of vocals on an R&B beat and they call that jazz. I hate to say this but Hip Hop was pure until white people got a hold of it. The suburbanites who listened to a Wu-Tang album and think they're experts on Black culture, the standards got slowly stripped away because people can't relate to the music that reflects the struggle but they can enjoy the party aspect of it so that's all they focus on. And since white consumers control the market, the party aspect is what was profitable and the struggle aspect got ignored.

Here, Sharon is adamant about the impact of white consumerism of Hip Hop as negative. Unlike the other “80s babies” that put the blame solely on the mainstream corporations and music industry, Sharon places some of it with white consumers for only patronizing certain aspects of Hip Hop and likens the “death” of Hip Hop to the plight of Jazz music that has been commercialized.

When discussing the relationship between Hip Hop and the mainstream though, the “80s babies” had a different position on the issue, with some claiming that certain members of Hip Hop culture are too concerned with what the mainstream does. They forget that Hip Hop is supposed to be an alternative to and a rejection of the mainstream, not something seeking acceptance from it. When discussing the attention that members of Hip Hop culture should pay to mainstream forces, Benjamin said:

Hip Hop is being represented the same way as any other genre is but what the execs and more importantly what WE forget is that Hip Hop has different rules. The execs want the artists to beg

the listeners to like their music but in Hip Hop the beauty is that artists are supposed to make whatever he or she wants and tell the listeners, 'hey if you don't like it...fuck you!' Hip Hop is about expressing yourself and putting [people] on to something [they] didn't know about. You make something fresh that's a part of you and no one else, and people either like it or they don't.

Here Benjamin claimed that members of Hip Hop culture often forget that the mainstream will not be able to accurately represent Hip Hop because they do not have an interest in doing so and even if they did, they do not understand it enough to do so. His suggestion for the members of the culture who are bothered by the representations is to ignore them and just continue to produce and live Hip Hop authentically so people can see what it really is. Benjamin and other "80s babies" who remain unconcerned with the mainstream representations of Hip Hop hold that it is supposed to remain misunderstood and misrepresented because it has disenfranchisement, resistance and rebellion at its foundation.

Other "80s babies," however, claimed that it is impossible to ignore the misrepresentation of themselves that they see in the mainstream. When expressing disappointment in the lack of diversity in mainstream representations of Hip Hop, Aaron said:

It's disappointing because you want to be represented by people who are similar to you, especially when they look at you and you don't usually see that on TV. I think it definitely hurts the culture in respect to other people's views because if you don't grow up in a neighborhood that embraces Hip Hop culture you don't see the variety. All you see is these violent, materialistic, flashy young people and then those images become the bases for generalizations of all people in the culture and all Black people too.

Connecting Hip Hop with Black culture, Aaron recognizes that the misrepresentations of

Hip Hop can lead to generalizations of blacks that help perpetuate negative stereotypes and racism. Speaking more personally, Carmen expressed why accurate representations of Hip Hop are important to her, asserting:

I love Hip Hop, it has made me the person I am. So to see people being shown something that's supposed to be Hip Hop, that I don't even connect with, I'm hurt because I feel that if they knew Hip Hop the way I do, they'd love it too. When something is that important to you, you want to share it with people. But the way it's put on TV and radio, people aren't getting to see the parts of Hip Hop that made me and a lot of us fall in love with it.

Though “80s babies” like Aaron and Carmen expressed how strongly affected they are by the representations of Hip Hop culture in the mainstream, the majority of the “80s babies,” though none of them appreciated it, expressed that the misrepresentations of Hip Hop in the mainstream were not something that they could eliminate because they are a byproduct of mainstream exposure that has many benefits for Hip Hop culture and its members. They did, however, emphatically discuss the many ways that they could combat the prevalence of negative representations and the suppression of positive ones

Generally, when the “80s babies” spoke of the mainstream, they were referring to large recording companies, business corporations and mainstream media outlets. Some, however, indicted certain individuals, as well as these large institutions, and warned against putting all of the blame on the mainstream for the bad condition they believe Hip Hop to be in. Placing the blame on opportunistic artists, Sharon claims:

Its easy to make the industry out to be Godzilla that knocks over the buildings and destroys everything but it's us too because the public accepts this shit and spend their money on these fake artists who don't love the music and just do it to have a Jacob watch. I blame them before the labels because they're pimping themselves. Hip Hop is supposed to be done out of love, you

would never put one of your loved ones on the corner to whore for you, no amount of money would be worth it. But these artists don't love it, they just love the money. And every pimp has their john, and that's where the public come in and buy this bullshit and make it successful. Although us heads are a minority and we don't have the power to make artists go platinum on our own we can still make our voices be known and not accept the bullshit.

Although Sharon places the blame for what she refers to as the death of Hip Hop on many sources, ultimately she blames the mainstream for turning Hip Hop culture into a commodity that could be exploited easily by all looking to make a profit, whether it be opportunist artists, record executives or other large corporations. Acknowledging their limited power, Sharon asserts that it is still the responsibility of those that love Hip Hop to speak out about its exploitation. Giving members of the culture more credit than Sharon does, Donte puts some of the blame on members of Hip Hop who are sometimes too quick to believe the representations without evaluating the motivations for what they are being presented. He warns:

We have to be careful of making mainstream equivalent to bad because Common and Kweli have #1 and #2 albums in the country and I relate to what they speak about and they have always represented Hip Hop culture but we have to be honest about what mainstream means. Because just as Hip Hop has different levels, so does the mainstream. MTV has different stations some that play Soulja Boy and others that play Kidz in the Hall. The Hip Hop as we know it may not be represented in what we see on BET but it's reflected in the market. Everywhere I turn the Blu & Exile is sold out. Nas got a #1 selling album even with it being as politically charged and controversial as it was. The challenge we have is to compensate for the fact that the mainstream even at its best, only really represents the rap music aspect of Hip Hop culture

Donte expresses how the relationship between the culture and the industry is a complicated one where there is not one complete winner and one complete loser. He

also presents the position that the representations of Hip Hop are so narrow that they do not accurately represent the state of the culture in terms of how successful some of Hip Hop's most respected artists are and do even less to represent the aspects of the culture besides rap music.

While the "80s babies" acknowledged that there are negative components of the relationship between Hip Hop mainstream that are often experienced only by Hip Hop, they also admitted that there are a lot of positive things that Hip Hop has gotten out of the relationship. Acknowledging the negative aspects, but also discussing the ways that the mainstream exposure has helped to advance Hip Hop, Anthony said:

Hip Hop suffers right now in the creativity department due to a lack of diversity being allowed on a mainstream level because of corporations that control both the record companies and the media outlets but honestly I think financially wise, Hip Hop is at an all time high. Right now we are in a position to make a good living using our artistic abilities and we can use those earnings to help give back and improve our own community and help the culture continue to be successful. The challenge is not to let the mainstream dictate the art to the point where Hip Hop no longer represents the people but instead just reinforces the views that the masses already have of the people.

Echoing Anthony's point about recognizing the financial opportunities available within Hip Hop and the responsibility of keeping Hip Hop's integrity resting on the people within the culture, Steven said:

When I see Hip Hop represented, real Hip Hop, in commercials and on television I think it's a good thing. You have a lot of the "Hip Hop Heads" especially B-Boys who think it's exploitation but everyone has a standard in which they're willing to carry themselves and I think you should just make sure you only agree to that standard. You can put yourself out there in ways that you

won't like but that's on you and it just reflects how you feel about yourself your artform and your culture. The exposure is a good thing for Hip Hop because artists want to make a career out of it and the young people need to see artists. People want to rap and DJ and do graffiti and dance to make a living.

For Steven, the career opportunities that Hip Hop has provided to members of the culture is wonderful, but he asserts that the opportunities have to be balanced with integrity from artists concerning the representations of the culture. He also claims it to be very important that members have individual standards of Hip Hop that they constantly live to uphold and defend. With his example, he is speaking specifically of Hip Hop artists, but his position can be extended to all industries where members of Hip Hop culture are involved and see attempts to exploit Hip Hop's influence for profit without regard to the negative affects on the culture. As the "80s babies" begin their professional careers, they can make it a priority to ensure that Hip Hop is represented properly wherever they have the ability. Extending the appreciation for how exposure via the mainstream has helped Hip Hop become successful, Carmen says:

We have to thank the mainstream exposure for spreading this culture around the world. Hip Hop started in New York, if it had stayed there, everybody outside there would have never known about it.

I don't live in New York and I've never even been there but through radio and television I was able to learn about the culture there and then see how to use the artforms they developed and flip them to represent the style of my local community. The people in Europe and Africa and all the continents who love this culture would never have been exposed to it without the mainstream exposure so although the mainstream does some things that make me cringe in terms of how it uses Hip Hop to push other agendas and perpetuate stereotypes. But, as long as there's some representation out there, it gives us something to talk about. A reminder of what our purpose and position in this culture are.

Carmen here discusses mainstream exposure of Hip Hop as what allowed it to become global and she expresses how she uses the misrepresentations in the mainstream media to keep her grounded about what Hip Hop should be. In some way or another, all of the "80s babies" accepted their position as ambassadors of Hip Hop culture, whether it be on a personal level or with larger social justice movements.

#### 4.6 Responsibility to Hip Hop Culture

Whether they believe that the problems with Hip Hop are caused by apathy and elitism from the culture's members, exploitation from outside forces or a combination of both, all of the "80s babies" acknowledge that if anything is going to be done to help Hip Hop continue to progress, they will have to take some responsibility shaping its representations in both the professional and personal aspects of their lives. They must also accept the responsibility of teaching younger generations about Hip Hop to combat what they are exposed to through mainstream representations. Recognizing that Hip Hop and its members have grown up since its inception in the 1970s, Roger discusses the importance in accepting Hip Hop's growth in progressing the culture:

I think we need to remember that Hip Hop is no longer a youth culture, it started that way because when it started it was created by youth, but they're adults now and still part of the culture, and we're adults now and still part of the culture. We're like the second or third generation of the culture, that would be like calling the Black Panthers a youth group. As a result we have to acknowledge that Hip Hop at 30 does and probably should not look like Hip Hop at 15, but there's room for both and a need for both. We're the only ones who do this. Look at rock, jazz, country; all those artists like the Rolling Stones and Ozzie Osborne and Willie Nelson and all the Jazz cats still living, they still perform. With Hip Hop though, we think that once we get a certain age, we outgrow Hip Hop. For me though, it's all I know, and I'm not gonna abandon it, I'm just going to incorporate it in my life a different way than I did when I was 15.

Here Roger points out that Hip Hop is often associated with youth but that it is no longer only a youth culture because its longevity has allowed members that began their participation as youth to grow to adults and in some cases raise children, teaching them



the culture. Roger and other “80s babies” argue that the association with Hip Hop to youth culture has stifled the culture’s growth, as Travis pointed out:

Hip Hop isn’t allowed to grow up because when artists mature, they lose respect. I know people who heard Kingdom Come and said they couldn’t relate to Jay-Z talking about having good credit and owning business. These are people in college with me so they can’t relate to selling drugs and shootouts either, but they feel it’s more acceptable to hear about and try to relate to. Because we have bought into the stereotypical view of Hip Hop in the mainstream that presents it as all street culture of getting money we have forgotten about the soul of the culture which is self-expression and the desire to be an individual; something that we should get better at with age. Instead we try to fit into what we are told about ourselves. We buy into the bullshit that all we are is irresponsible and immature and all that stuff so now we become the stereotypes.

Both Travis and Roger expressed the detriment that results from viewing Hip Hop only as a youth culture by both those within the culture and those outside of it. Travis expressed how mainstream representations support the view within Hip Hop culture of maturity as a bad thing and Roger discussed how that perspective is specific to Hip Hop and not other music cultures.

Further discussing the problems with Hip Hop that have to be acknowledged before they can begin to improve it, the “80s babies” often claimed that the “millenniums” have traded in the true meaning of Hip Hop for quests of stardom, as Roger proclaimed:

A lot of people in the younger generation don’t care about the art of emceeing as much as they are focused on the end result of having a hit record. They want the success but they’re not as willing to put in the work for it. Before it was big business and mass produced and commodified, you had to be dope. Nobody would let you in the circle to break if you were wack,

nobody would let you on the tables or the mic'. If you were wack so we had to hone our crafts before we even attempted to be a part. Now though, all they need is the computer and the internet.

As mentioned earlier, the technological advances available to the “millenniums” and the climate of the music industry looking to capitalize on Hip Hop trends has allowed them to produce art immediately, without going through the development process that was required by members of previous generations wanting to represent the culture. Roger claimed that the result is art that is often popular, but does not have the skill level that Hip Hop has historically been praised for having.

Many of the “80s babies” began their critiques of Hip Hop with an admonishment of the “millenniums,” but Aaron warned against putting so much blame on them with the acknowledgement that they deserve the ability to grow up like the “80s babies” are beginning to do. Aaron said:

At first it was easy to write off all of these young kids who have adopted the 80s Hip Hop style with the high top fades and the bright colors and the big rope chains because we think that they are just taking the images and have no understanding of the culture, but a lot of them are actually going back to that 80s Hip Hop ethos of having fun, listening to the music, learning the artforms and the history of the culture but as always, it's a small number who will go that far to actually do the work. What we have to do is recognize the ones that do put in the work to show them that we appreciate them taking the traditions seriously because the torch has to be passed eventually.

The most common difference between generations that the “80s babies” express is the level of knowledge about Hip Hop culture that they feel has declined with each generation, claiming that with the “millenniums,” the image holds more weight among the members than the substance and meaning behind it. The majority of “80s babies”

claim that the quest for knowledge is the thing that separates them from the “millenniums,” admitting that they learned the culture from a more balanced output of mainstream representations and from Hip Hop “pioneers” and “alchemists” while the “millenniums” learn Hip Hop culture mainly via mainstream representations that are not as balanced as the ones that the “80s babies” had. Many of the “80s babies” also expressed that a strong personal connection to the original purposes of Hip Hop are necessary for people to take the initiative to learn about Hip Hop culture and be a part of it. Sarah, a community service coordinator and aspiring singer, said:

You have to love it enough to want to know everything you can about it. Be able to find the root of it and feel proud of it and know that it is your heritage. I think we who claim to love it have to take that responsibility upon ourselves to figure out what Hip Hop is and how it fits into our lives. But it is also the responsibility of the culture and community to make sure that the knowledge is available. We rely so much on word of mouth but we need written and visual history too; style wars is so dope because it’s a documentary that we can always look at to teach us about Hip Hop that won’t change like people’s recollections. Hip Hop is over more than one generation now so it’s the responsibility of us in the culture who have children and who know children, to teach them the culture.

Echoing Sarah’s comments about personal responsibility and passion for Hip Hop, Donald discussed his fervor for Hip Hop

I’m the type of person who, when I heard Mos I wanted to know who he was affiliated with...then the names Kewli, Ayatollah, 88 keys, Hi-Tek came up and I wanted to know, who are those cats affiliated with and you just end up backtracking. Because “Black on Both Sides” was Mos first official release [I wanted to know] what led up to this point and then you go back and find out he was affiliated with the native tongues which consisted of a Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul and then you find out who those cats are and who they’re affiliated with and you go back

and you keep doing it because and those journeys are where the fun of the culture is. The thing is though, you have to be willing to put in a lot of work to even get that joy.

Donald and other “80s babies” claimed that it was their own love for Hip Hop that drove them to learn about the culture on their own, not just its current manifestations but those that existed before their participation. They often discuss the process Donald describes as “digging in the crates,” where they trace song samples or artist influences as far back as they can to try to find original sources. Many of the “80s babies” go into detail about how the process introduced them to not only aspects of Hip Hop culture before their involvement, but also to other musicians and important historical events and leaders. In addition to “digging in the crates,” almost all of the “80s babies” mentioned observing older family members or friends participating in the culture, thereby shaping their understanding of Hip Hop culture. The participation of the “pioneers” and “alchemists” in the “80s babies”’ induction into Hip Hop is one of the things that the “80s babies” claim separates them from the “millenniums.” They claim that for the “millenniums,” respect for the culture’s history is secondary to the opportunities to gain money and stardom using it. They further assert that the “Millenniums” are resistant to any guidance that the “80s babies” attempt to offer, which has caused many of the “80s babies” to be hesitant to nurture the “millenniums,” expressing a belief that their impact would be on the generation of Hip Hop culture that will come after the “millenniums.” Travis explained the “80s babies”’ position within the culture that makes it difficult for them to be respected sometimes by older and younger members of the culture:

We’re still youngens. We haven’t really come into our own maturity yet. We are approaching it but nobody really represents us right now, all the best artists are still from the generation before

ours. As our generation's voice gets more established and gets more respect from both our artists and just the ones of us who are out here makin moves in sports, politics and whatever, then we can talk to the younger ones and they'll listen. Right now, we're at the point where we could either be a lost generation or one that is going to help take the culture further, because the kids comin' after us are worse than we are and I've heard the older cats say that they didn't really set a good example and I think that's true because the kids who are right behind us came up listening to that gangster and baller rap, so that's what they're all about. so we have to make sure that for the younger kids, they have a good understanding of what Hip Hop is according to what we think in our generation.

Here, Travis discusses how the "millenniums" hold the "Jiggy Era" as their standard because it is the era in which many of them were introduced to and became a part of Hip Hop, in the same way that the "80s babies" hold the "Golden Era" as their standard for Hip Hop. He further asserts that the "80s babies" are just now beginning to develop their own identity separate from the previous generations within Hip Hop culture and society at large, but strongly holds that as the "80s babies" develop their identity, they will have more influence on the culture and its younger generations.

When discussing their responsibility to Hip Hop culture as further generations of the culture are born, the most important thing that the "80s babies" mentioned was supporting Hip Hop as a way to help preserve and perpetuate the culture, Benjamin said:

As far as a culture, we have to support what we think represents Hip Hop the way we love it and make it known why we support it so those unfamiliar with what Hip Hop is can at least understand what we think it is. Also, as artists, we have to get back to the love of the culture and make sure that we are putting out products that we are completely satisfied with. We've always spoken our messages of the culture through the art so we have to continue to do that.

Emphasizing the financial support that members of Hip Hop should give the culture, Donte asserted:

If you love Hip Hop culture, support it. Buy albums from artists you like, buy a painting that a graph writer did, go to a concert, support a real Hip Hop clothing line. Don't talk about pockets being tight because my pockets are tight too but I love Hip Hop so much that I have sacrificed other shit for this culture because I love it so much. Your purchase is a vote so be active if you care about the art and the culture.

While Donte speaks of the power of the purchase of members of the culture to help perpetuate Hip Hop, Steven speaks specifically about the importance of artists to keep the integrity and not give in to mainstream pressures and said:

You have a lot of the "Hip Hop Heads" especially B-Boys who think it's exploitation but everyone has a standard in which they're willing to carry themselves and I think you should just make sure you only agree to that standard. You can put yourself out there in ways that you won't like but that's on you and it just reflects how you feel about yourself your artform and your culture.

The "80s babies" also admitted the extensive time and effort needed to educate younger generations about Hip Hop but acknowledge that it is something that is beginning to be done through new outlets. Excited at the possibilities of Hip Hop being accepted into academia, Carmen said:

I use Hip Hop to teach to my students and I've seen college classes about Hip Hop, and they get filled. What that tells me is that there are people who are curious about what this culture is. Sometimes we think that being in college might be too late, but it's never too late to get into Hip Hop the key is to get into it the right way since so many of us are teachers and activists and community workers, we can't help but use Hip Hop to teach, because it's what we know. What we have to start doing now, is open dialog with each other about how to teach Hip Hop.

Here, Carmen discusses a Hip Hop centered pedagogy, where Hip Hop teaches students not only about Hip Hop, but about a variety of subjects like literature, history, politics and others. In the new millennium, many universities have begun to teach Hip Hop centered classes and now early childhood education programming has begun to use Hip Hop rhyming games as teaching tools. Carmen's discussion about the necessity for dialogue being opened up has been addressed by the numerous Hip Hop summits that occur internationally to bring members of the culture together to discuss how to help maintain and progress it. Speaking about the importance of these summits and other similar events, Roger said:

There are Hip Hop summits that take place all around this country all throughout the year and it attracts all types of people who wouldn't normally be connected because they all love Hip Hop. You can have a gangster break bread with a pacifist. I met a group of native Americans who incorporated breakin' with their tribal dances and rapped in their own native language, and used graffiti with their tribal art so you begin to see how much this culture stretches but we have to bring the people together and give them some spotlight to combat the negativity that is put in the spotlight.

Besides the development of a Hip Hop pedagogy and the many summits, the "80s babies" have also embraced the new technology of the internet to help them on their missions. When speaking of how the internet can help, Aaron asserted:

The blog and Internet movement is very important because now we see that the stronghold that television once had is gone. Now artists can post music on Myspace and not have to deal with labels if they don't want to and the blogs are the best place to just write what you feel about Hip Hop. Blogs and message boards are important for keeping the dialog open because it brings

likeminded people together that wouldn't ever get to know each other without the internet. If the negative images use the Internet, we have to use the Internet for positive messages too.

The belief in Hip Hop as a teaching tool for the "80s babies" comes from their insistence on how much they learned about themselves and their history from being members of Hip Hop culture.

When asked about what Hip Hop has taught them, the "80s babies" have a laundry list of things, including the beauty of language, the importance of truth, and the courage of individuality. Though they discuss how tiring the fight to maintain Hip Hop can be at times, the majority of "80s babies" emphatically assert that it is a worthy cause. They accept that Hip Hop may not be as popular as they would like it to be because of the influence of consumerism, but as Sarah asserted:

It's an inspiration for me doing stuff that's not directly related to Hip Hop. It's my foundation but I've begun to branch out, but at the same time I think Hip Hop is branching out too so I can't say it's dead. There's still a spark, there's still hope because when I go out I still see tags up. I don't know what it all means but Hip Hop's influences are still around, I can see 'em but I don't know if everyone else does. I can still go to parties where there's a break beat and some kids doin' some crazy moves or I'll hear new music, a dope artist that I've never heard before. As long as youth need an outlet Hip Hop will continue to provide it for them. Of course the next generation of Hip Hop will look different from ours, but ours looks different from the previous one.

Though some of the "80s babies" admit that at times they feel like they are fighting a losing battle, they ultimately express that Hip Hop will continue, and even if it takes on manifestations that they can barely recognize, traces of the culture's origins will always remain. Acknowledging this, they have decided to put their energy into making sure that



their influences are present in future generations' manifestations, even if they are unrecognizable. The "Hoppers" and the "Heads" have an easier time coming to grips with that possibility than the "Snobs" who believe that Hip Hop has lost its purity to a point where what is being passed off as Hip Hop does not fit their criteria. But even those "Snobs" claim that they will continue to live Hip Hop the way they know it, likening themselves to samurai warriors forced to live reclusively, as their way of life was deemed obsolete by the masses. When contemplating the future of Hip Hop, Curtis concluded with a Star Wars reference, proclaiming:

Hip Hop is like the Jedi order. The Jedi were forced into hiding to continue to practice their way of life, that's how Hip Hop will be. People will still be practicing the artforms but it will be completely off of the radar of the masses, which is the way it should be because Hip Hop is supposed to be the anti-mainstream. As long as we continue to uphold the culture, and increase the knowledge about it as far as writing and recording our history future generations will seek it out and we will always have Hip Hop and it will never die. Of course there are only about 3000 Jedis stretched across the 750,000 or so galaxies, they're out there.

## 5. CONCLUSION: WHAT WE LEARNED AND WHERE WE GO NEXT

### 5.1 Summary of Findings

Initially when looking at Hip Hop culture, there were automatic links drawn between it and other subcultures, like British Punk cultures and American Hippie culture, because they are both youth resistance cultures with a powerful musical aspect. Because of the influence of Hip Hop's musical element, it is also easy to draw links between it and other genres of Black music like Blues, Soul and Jazz because of the journey from being considered "race music" to "popular music" and the pros and cons, as well as the byproducts of the transition for the artists involved and the people the music represents. Though these connections are accurate, they fail to look at Hip Hop's unique dynamics of Hip Hop culture that make it very different from the cultures and musical genres to which it is compared.

The largest difference between Hip Hop and other subcultures is that members of the culture did not grow out of it like Hippies and Punks did. The disenfranchisement that attracted many white youth to subculture movements waned as they grew older and began to assimilate back into mainstream culture. They often refer to their involvement with these cultures as the byproduct of their teen angst.

Because Hip Hop has its origins in a resistance tradition that has existed for Blacks since their arrival to the United States, the culture's members are less likely to grow out of it when it continues to reflect their realities even as they enter adulthood.

By speaking with members of the culture transitioning from adolescence into adulthood, this research shows how the views of Hip Hop culture differ depending on the age of the members, but the culture is beginning to establish patterns and trends that reemerge as the culture progresses through different cycles. Understanding the different elements in Hip Hop's cultural cycle is valuable, because it provides the ability to make predictions for Hip Hop's future by looking at its past. The "80s babies" recognized that the principles of the culture remain but with the new generation, the signs and signifiers are different. They also claim that some of the most popular symbols within the culture have lost their meaning as their popularity grew. These two admissions present the "80s babies" with the challenge of preserving the meaning of Hip Hop's classic symbols and embracing new symbols that signify the culture's key principles.

## **5.2 Implications for Hip Hop and Academia**

Overall though, the purpose of this study was to use critical ethnography to uncover the views of a highly discussed but rarely engaged group. As I mentioned earlier, everyone speaks about Hip Hop, but those who represent it are frequently left out of those conversations. My attempt here was to give voice to the “80s babies,” in order to fill a void in the scholarship and provide a basis for understanding Hip Hop culture from its members and not just those outside who study it academically. For those interested specifically in Hip Hop, this research shows a multigenerational aspect to a culture that shows its growth because at one time all of its members were lumped into one generation. Acknowledging that Hip Hop has more than one generation introduces the possibility for research concerning how the culture’s symbols and their meaning are being transferred between generations.

### **5.3 Limitations and Possibilities for Future Research**

This project was an ethnographic study of the “80s babies” generation within Hip Hop culture, undertaken with the goal of learning how this generation understands their culture on their own terms. By focusing on views from within the culture, political and social issues tied to it were not deeply addressed though there were comments on the many connections. It is my position that the connections between Hip Hop and socio/political local and world issues are taking place without first gaining a better understanding of what Hip Hop is. The connections to violence and criminality, social critique and resistance, perpetuation of stereotypes and justification for racism, destructive relationships between young black men and women, and many others are very important, but they were not the focus of this project. The responses in the data did allude to many of these issues that may provide foundations for future research. Other possibilities for future research include similar studies with the other generations of Hip Hop for a cross-generational analysis about what views members do and do not share, and how different generations interact on those different views.

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## APPENDIX A

## INTERVIEW PROMPTS

- Age?
- Gender?
- Nationality/Ethnicity/Race?
- Where do you currently reside
- How long have you been a part of Hip Hop culture?
  - In what aspects?
  - At what level?
- What first drew you to Hip Hop culture
- What defines Hip Hop culture?
  - Is this a universal definition?
    - If so, who established this definition?
    - If not, how does it vary (age, region, etc.)
- Can you tell what is “authentic Hip Hop” and what is an imitation?
  - How?
- Is/ should Hip Hop be only for the youth/ minorities/ urbanites?
  - If so, why limit it to a specific group?
  - Are there situations where those outside of the specified group can be a part of the culture?
    - Is it good or bad to allow “outsiders”?
- What are the changes that Hip Hop has gone through/ is going through?
  - Are these changes good or bad for the culture?
    - If good, what makes them good?
    - If bad, what makes them bad?
- Is Hip Hop Dead?
  - If so, what killed it?
  - If not, what is the current condition that it is in, and why do you feel this way?
- What does Hip Hop need to survive for future generations?
  - Whose responsibility is it to keep it alive?
  - Can it survive if it exists in a different way that it has traditionally?
    - If one or more components of Hip Hop die?
      - Are there some components that are more important than others?
  - What are the biggest obstacles to its survival?
    - What makes these obstacles the biggest?
    - How do you combat them?

## APPENDIX B

## DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE

<u>NAME</u>	<u>AGE</u>	<u>GENDER</u>	<u>RACE</u>	<u>LOCATION</u>
Aaron	23	M	B	South
Allen	26	M	B	East
Anthony	26	M	B	Midwest
Benjamin	22	M	W	East
Carlos	23	M	B	West
Carmen	23	F	B	Midwest
Charles	29	M	B	East
Curtis	24	M	B	South
Donald	22	M	B	West
Donte	26	M	B	West
Frank	21	M	B	South
Hasaan	28	M	B	East
John	27	M	B	South
Julie	25	F	W	East
Matt	24	M	W	Midwest
Michael	23	M	B	Midwest
Paul	24	M	W	Midwest
Rachel	27	F	W	Midwest
Roger	24	M	B	Midwest
Sarah	26	F	B	West
Scott	28	M	W	South
Sharon	29	F	B	Midwest
Steven	26	M	B	Midwest
Travis	25	M	B	Midwest
William	24	M	B	West

## VITA

Charity Clay received her Bachelor of Science in accounting from DePaul University in 2006. She began as a graduate student at Texas A&M University in August of 2006 in the Department of Sociology and completed her M.S. in 2009. Her research interests are race, class and gender, culture and social psychology. She plans to publish work focusing on the intersection of race class and gender in Hip Hop and sports using symbolic interaction to frame her methodology.

Ms. Clay can be reached at the Sociology Department located at 311 Academic Building; Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843. Her email address is [yungclay@tamu.edu](mailto:yungclay@tamu.edu)